

HANDSOME JACK

JAMES GREENWOOD
("THE AMATEUR CASUAL")



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James Greenwood is a journalist and miscellaneous writer living in London. He visited a workhouse in the disguise of a pauper; hence the title "The Amateur Casual".

HANDSOME JACK

AND OTHER STORIES.

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BY
JAMES GREENWOOD,
(“THE AMATEUR CASUAL.”)

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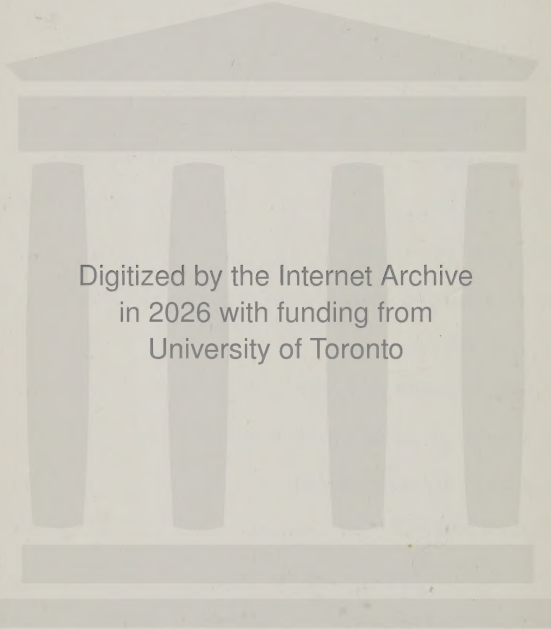
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HANDSOME JACK.

FIVE months previously there had occurred a furious fight between two convicts at work in the quarries of Broadstone—or, perhaps, it would be more correct to say that a murderous and seemingly unprovoked assault had been made by one, an old “lag,” whose then sentence was fourteen years, on another undergoing his first term of penal servitude for the comparatively short period of three years, and that the latter had defended himself so desperately that, while he was lamed for life, the aggressor was mortally injured.

It was the first time the two had met within the walls of the prison. A sudden heavy shower coming on, the men in the quarries were ordered into the shelter sheds, and it was in one of these that they came face to face. Sowerby, the elder, who had a crowbar in his hand, immediately attacked Hayesman, and the latter, with a spade, returned the terrific blow ; and they dealt one at the other until the warders

rushed in and parted them. Hayesman's thigh was fractured and his head and face much damaged, and Sowerby had sustained severe injury to his chest, several of his ribs being broken. His lungs, which were affected before, rapidly developed serious symptoms, and it was soon perceived that he had not very long to live, and was allowed under such circumstances the usual privileges of the prison infirmary, among which are books to read and paper and pen and ink to write with. Several times Sowerby had been asked to explain why he had attacked Hayesman, but his invariable reply was, "When I am gone you will know ; not before." For some weeks before his death his constant amusement was writing in a copy-book as he sat up in bed, and this, headed "Why I would have murdered Handsome Jack Hayesman," was, after his demise, found under his pillow :—

"Let me first of all explain how I came by the letters on which the story I've got to tell turns. I came by them in the ordinary way of business.

"When I say business, I mean burglary. It was a simple sort of a job, and I did it single-handed. It was what we call a parapet job, which means getting into an empty house standing in a row with other houses, and getting out at the attic window and walking along the parapet till you come to an unfastened window, or one that will become so with a little persuasion, and then in you go and make the best of your chance. It was about ten o'clock at night, and the haul I made was a fairish one. As well as I could make out there was nobody at home but the servants in the kitchen, so that I had the run of the upper

rooms, including the best bed-rooms, undisturbed. I did very well. In one bed-room I broke open a kind of jewel-case and got a rare handful of good goods—rings, chains, and gold watches, and lots of other things—and, discovering that there was a secret drawer in the case, I stove it in, but found nothing there but a common-looking little box, not more than large enough to hold a pack of cards, and this, without opening it, I put in my pocket.

“I got out of the house as easily as I got into it, and before one o’clock in the morning went to bed, drunk on the strength of the fifteen pounds I sold the swag for. No part of it came out of the little box I found in the secret drawer. All there was to be found in that was three letters, and I felt savage about that, having reckoned on something extra precious, and I crumpled them all up together, and stowed them in an inside pocket of my coat to use them as pipe-lights, and the little box itself—it was a mere trumpery affair of common deal—I crunched under my heel on the pavement, and kicked it into the road. This was after I left the house where I got the goods from, and while I was on my way to where I knew that I could get rid of them.

“It was an old jacket I had on at the time, and as I got a suit of clothes out of pawn out of the fifteen pounds, I did not wear it again for more than a fortnight, which was just about as long as my little windfall of luck lasted me, and then my bettermost togs had to be put up the spout again, and I once more took to my old jacket. I hadn’t heard anything about the robbery I had done ; but I didn’t look far

enough, else I should. I only looked for any fuss being made about it outside the police-station where they put out the different sorts of placards. I didn't look in the newspapers. If I had I should have seen an advertisement that would have interested me. I dare say it puzzled a good many that read it:—

“‘To Night Birds.—Pounced on and carried away, three pet Sparrows in small wooden box. Ten pounds reward. No questions asked.—Address, in first instance, C. B. A., Chief Office, St. Martin's-le-Grand.’

“But I am wrong in saying that the advertisement would have interested me at the time it appeared. I hadn't even looked at the letters then, and I shouldn't have known what was meant. I had quite forgotten about the letters I had shoved, all crumpled up together, in the old jacket pocket, and they had been there quite a matter of three weeks when, wanting some paper to light my pipe with, I pulled 'em out all in a bunch, thinking what a fool I had been to overlook 'em, when, of course, had they been found on me, they would have been quite enough to have convicted me. I thought that I would burn them now at any rate. But there was no reason for my hurrying over it. I was alone in a tap-room at the time, having a pint of beer, and there was a fire there. So I tore off a strip from one of the envelopes, which had on it the address of the crib I had cracked, and, having lit my pipe, simply because I had nothing else to amuse me, I took the letter out of the envelope and read it. I never was anything of a scholar, but it would have been plain to any one that, though the

letter was addressed to a lady, it wasn't written by one. It was a puzzler, anyway.

“‘DEAR MISS ——,—Although I can, of course, understand your anxiety about the little matter I have promised to manage for you, there are difficulties in the way of doing it in the way you would like it done more than you think for. It would have been a good deal easier—though gracious forbid that I should plunge myself to such a depth of wickedness—to have done away with the little fellow altogether. A child of three years old is such an awkward age, you see, being neither a baby, nor old enough to shift. And it makes it harder for me to get anybody to take him as I want him took, his being so plain. If he was a nice-looking little boy lots of people might be got to take a fancy for him, and take him off my hands to do as they liked with him, very likely without any payment at all. I am aware that you don't care what becomes of him, and will be satisfied so that he is so provided for in a way that is secret and quiet, and he won't be likely to give any more trouble at the present time or in the future. There is one good job—for you, I mean—the little fellow is a long way from being strong, and, being used to careful living and kind nursing, if he is put with them he will have to rough it, and it is likely he will soon pine off. You shall hear from me again the moment I have settled it, which I have reason for thinking will be in the next few days.—Respectfully yours,

‘SARAH SPARROW.’

"I couldn't make either head or tail of all this, and I opened the other two letters to see if they made it any clearer, and then found that I had read what may be called the middle one first. This was the first one :—

"‘DEAR MISS ——,—You will be glad to know that I got away with the little boy all right. I was ready for him when you managed to get him up out of the back garden gate into the lane. Of course, he knew me, coming so frequent to work at the house, and he wasn't much frightened. It being evening, there was nobody in the lane, and I slipped the frock and things over his own, and carried him home without much trouble. Of course I can do no more just at present than keep dark and take care that nobody sees him. No doubt there will be a reward offered and a fuss made, but not so much as if his mother was alive ; and his father being ill abed, will make a difference in our favour. But all that you must manage. All you've got to do, miss, is to be punctual with the further sum you promised me when I've fulfilled your wishes complete, and you shall find that I am not the one to flinch from a bargain,—Yours respectfully,
‘SARAH SPARROW.’

"This letter was dated three weeks earlier than the one I have already given the contents of, and this was the third one—short and sweet :—

"‘DEAR MISS ——,—You won't be troubled any more. He is dead. I passed him off as a nurse child

to the parish doctor I was obliged to call in for his slow fever, and he gave his certificate, in which the child is called Charles Mason, and he will be buried at Ilford Cemetery next Sunday.—Hoping I have given satisfaction, and that you will liberally reward my humble services, respectfully yours,

‘SARAH SPARROW.’

“I went through the three letters and read them over again; not that I’m going to pretend that they gave me any idea that there might be something made out of them. I could see plain enough that they furnished a key to a queer sort of a game that had been played between Sarah Sparrow and the lady she was writing to, but it was no business of mine. As I have already said, I knew nothing about the advertisement, ‘To Night Birds,’ then. All I knew was how I had come by the letters. I couldn’t even be sure that the party they were addressed to still lived at the house I broke into, for the date on them was four years ago. I might have had the thought cross my mind, ‘I reckon that the one who kept these letters so secret would give a trifle if they could have them back again,’ but I wasn’t such a fool as to think about sending or taking ’em back. A likely thing, when to have done so would be to give myself up for the robbery! ‘They’re best burnt and an end to them,’ I says to myself, and I screwed them together, and only that I had to cross the room to get to the fire-place they would have been burnt there and then, when I heard the tap-door opened, and I slipped ’em into my pocket again. It was a narrow escape. A

half, a quarter of a minute more, and they would have been black tinder, gone up the chimney along with the smoke. If I could have known what would have come of their being saved from the fire, I would have thrust my hand and all between the bars but they should have been burnt.

"But it wasn't to be. The door opened, and in came a man I knew, but had no liking for. He wasn't my sort. Some called him 'Soldier,' and others called him 'Handsome Jack.' If they'd used the name that best fitted him they'd have called him 'Shabby Hound,' and have done with him. He wasn't exactly what might be called a thief, though he had come down so low that he kept the company of such. But he was a gentleman, bless you! The only son of a father and mother who had plenty of money, and lived in a fine house at the West-end, and Handsome Jack had been brought up and educated to mix with the same sort of people. But he was a bad one. He had forged his father's name to a pretty tune before he was twenty, and went soldiering when he had lost the lot of money he made by it at gambling. I don't know what it was he was kicked out of the Army for, but it was for something the disgrace of which his old father couldn't stand against, and he died. After that Handsome Jack came the penitent dodge, and went back and lived with his mother, and in eighteen months he fleeced her of every pound she had, and she was brought to poverty, and was lost sight of.

"It didn't trouble her son what had become of her. The mean whelp used to tell the story and laugh

over it. This was the man whose sudden coming into the tap-room caused me to put the three letters into my pocket instead of into the fire. He was good-looking enough as far as his face and figure went, and, miserably shabby as he was, it was easy to see that he wasn't of a kidney with them he was pals with now. He wasn't more than five or six and twenty, and, being a scholar, he was good at writing begging-letters, 'Brummagem' petitions, false characters—anything that would bring him in a shilling or two. He was clever enough to have joined the regular school, but he was known to be a coward, and the lads couldn't trust him, and though they didn't mind chumming with him—he could sing a rattling good song, and had always plenty of lively stories to tell—they didn't reckon him as one of themselves. He was down on his luck when he looked into the tap-room, and, finding me there, begged me to stand him twopenn'orth of gin and give him a pipe of tobacco. When he was most miserable was the time when he had most to say about old times, when he could flash about in tip-top toggery, drinking champagne, and setting less value on sovereigns than now on ha'pence or fardens; and this was his style of talk as we was sitting down in the tap-room together.

"'I know where I was a thundering fool,' says he. 'I should have made more of myself while I was mixing with those who had money.'

"'How do you mean, more of yourself?' says I, laughing; 'do you mean to say you was too shy and modest? You couldn't have been plated very

thick with those virtues,' I says. 'It's all rubbed off now, Jack, and the brass is bare enough.'

"'No; what I mean,' says he, 'I ought to have been wide awake enough, while I had the handling of coin and held a position, to have made a market of my good looks, and hooked a wife who could have kept me in clover. She might have been as ugly as sin and as old as Methusaleh,' he says; 'I could have put up with that so that she had a good balance at her banker's. I'd marry a she-devil,' he says with a oath, 'if she had plenty of the pieces.'

"There wasn't anything very striking in that remark, but the moment he said it I thought of the two women who had to do with the letters. I suppose it was because I had before thought on what a devilish bad pair they must be to serve a poor little friendless kid as they seemed to have served that one. And then, as though mention of the devil's name had conjured him into the room, and he had took the opportunity to give me a whisper, I says to Handsome Jack—

"'I tell you the woman you could best deal with, one who had plenty of tin and a blackish sort of a secret that you had somehow got hold of, and which the telling of would ruin her—get her a few years' penal, p'raps!'

"Jack had a genteel hand—lean, long, and light—the very thing for pocket-picking if he had given his mind to it, and he grinned as he held it out, flat at first, and gradually closed it till he made a tight fist.

"'No sponge,' says he, 'was ever squeezed drier

that I'd squeeze such a party. But you only meet with 'em in story-books.'

"‘They sometimes turn up in pen and ink letters as well,’ says I. ‘Though, p'raps, them I'm thinking of might have been writ to go in a story-book, and have served their turn.'

"‘What about letters?’ he says, pricking up his ears.

"‘These three that I picked up in the street,’ and I took them out of my pocket. ‘They are queer reading. You may have a look at 'em if you like,’ and I gave him number one, taking care to take it out of the envelope, so that he might not see how it was addressed. He read it, looking puzzled all the time, till he came to the end, and then he gave a start and whistled, and looked at me in a way that, knowing him, put me on my guard, though I didn't know what against. But next moment he pretended to make light of it, and laughed.

"‘Story-book rubbish; no doubt of that, Jimmy,’ he says; ‘let's have a look at the other two.'

"But he didn't give me back the first one. He laid it on the table at the side of him, further from me. I reached over and took it, and then gave him number two, which he likewise read, and which I likewise took away from him before I gave him number three. Being a short 'un, it didn't take him a half-minute to read it, and then he seemed to hesitate like as to what he should do with it, and 'stead of giving it me back, he put it in his waistcoat pocket.

"‘Deuced funny,’ he says. ‘I shall stick to this

one. You might as well give me the other two as well. It will be a pity to spoil the pretty set.'

" 'The set hain't going to be spoilt,' I said. 'I'll spoil you if you try it on.'

"He was a smart-built chap, and, I dare say, a tough 'un if he had any pluck. But he knew what I was and what I could do with my fists when I was put out, so he laughed and said he was only joking, and gave me back the third letter.

" 'What are you going to do with them?' he asked.

" 'I'm going to burn 'em,' I says. 'What's the good of keeping 'em?'

" 'Well, I'll tell you,' he says, still speaking in the flurried sort of way he had been speaking in all along; 'I'll tell you what's the good of keeping 'em on one condition.'

" 'What's that?'

" 'That you will give me half of what those who lost 'em will give to get 'em back again.'

" 'And who was it that did lose 'em?' I asked, looking at him suspicious, for I thought he was trying to trap me.

" 'The person they are addressed to, I should say. The name is on the envelopes you were so careful to take the letters out of before you gave me them to read,' he answered, laughing. 'But you needn't be so precious cautious over it; I know all about it, Jimmy.'

" 'All about what?'

" 'Who they belong to; and, what's more, who it is that will give ten pounds to get them back again. They shall have 'em, too!'

"I thought that I saw now what he was driving at. Not a soul, as far as I was aware, knew about that burglary, but from his words it seemed that he had found it out, and meant to sell me. I knew that he was dog enough to do it. I got up from the table and went and stood with my back against the door.

"‘Now,’ says I, ‘let us have no sneaking; what do you know?’

"My manner frightened him, and made him hasten to explain himself.

"‘I only know, Jim Sowerby,’ says he, ‘what I dare say fifty thousand other people had an opportunity of learning. Sit down, man. You gave me something to read; now I’ll give you something.’ And, taking out a pencil and a bit of paper, he wrote down the words of that advertisement: ‘To Night Birds.—Pounced on and carried away, three pet Sparrows, in a small wooden box,’ and the rest of it.

"I felt so taken aback when I had read what he wrote, and when he told me the newspaper he had seen the advertisement in, that all I could say to him was—

"‘Well, what do you make of it?’

"‘I make of it,’ says he, ‘that the “three Sparrows” are in your pocket at the present moment. Whether they were flying loose when you pounced on ’em, or you found ’em in the little wooden box that is mentioned, you should know best. But it makes no difference. We can touch the ten pounds easily enough. “No questions asked.” No! “C. B. A.,” my beauty’ said he, laughing, ‘it isn’t likely. The

wonder is that you were fool enough to as good as own that you had such "pets" in your keeping. The question, Jim Sowerby, is, shall you restore them to Miss ——, or shall I?'

"As I have already said, I was hard up, and five pounds, if it could be had without risk, would be very welcome. If Handsome Jack undertook to answer the advertisement there couldn't be much danger for me. So we had a drop more to drink, and I told him all about it—I mean how I came by the letters, and the secret place I found them stowed away in. When I had finished, says he, 'Give me another pipe of tobacco, and don't say a word to me until I have smoked it out.' And I did. And when he had smoked out the 'bacca he knocked the ashes out of the pipe bowl, and he says, 'I've reckoned it all up, Jim Sowerby, and if luck favours us we're made men.'

"What! with ten pounds between us?'

"Ten devils between us,' says Handsome Jack. 'Money down, I wouldn't take ten tens for what I hope to make out of it.'

"Then you hain't going to answer the advertisement?'

"I'm going, first of all,' says he, 'to find out who she is and what the prospects of plunder are. Then I'm going to work to realize. But, first of all, I must have some clothes to wear. I can't make any move unless I'm dressed like a gentleman. You'll have to get some money, Jimmy.'

"So it was agreed upon between us that I should

give up the three letters to him, and that, much or little that came out of his way of working them, we should go fair shares in it. I did a bit of 'work' that same night on purpose to get the money to tog him out, and it very nearly cost me my liberty, if not my life. I was climbing down a water-pipe at the back of a house when the fastenings gave way, and down I came about twenty feet, with my ankle so badly sprained that I could scarcely crawl away. But I got a few pounds' worth of stuff, and it took me almost till daylight to limp back to my lodgings; and I was on the bed, not able to move, when Handsome Jack called on me by appointment.

"I told him where to take the things, and he took 'em and got the money, and I never clapped eyes on him for nearly a week! That's the kind of cur he was. He had the three letters, and the stuff he had to get rid of at the melter's was worth at least six pounds, and he knew that I didn't have as much as a half-crown, and was for the time crippled; but it being the Monday morning when he first called, it was the following Sunday night before he turned up again, and all the time I couldn't move out of the room for my sprained ankle, and hardly had grub to eat.

"I didn't need to look at him twice to know that he had been doing well. The money he got at the melter's wasn't enough to make him such a thundering swell by a long way. I hardly knowed him in his fashionable clothes, and his glossy silk hat, and his gloves, and his gold watch-chain. Of course, I began

to growl, but he swore that he couldn't get to me before. Ever since he had left me, he said, he had been busy night and day almost in my interest, of course, as well as his own, and the best of it was—he couldn't say as yet for certain—rather a good thing might be made out of it. He was able to spare me only a pound or two at present—two pounds ten was what he gave me. It wasn't, perhaps, he said, exactly half of what he had already been able to screw out of the party, but he had required the rest for necessary expenses, and he would make it up to me.

“Being for the time a cripple, I thought it best to be civil to him, and asked him what he had found out. I always knew he was clever in the underhanded and sneaking sort of way. He would have made a good detective, curse him! What he had found out was, that Miss —— had lived alone with her old uncle since she was a child, and had expected to come in for all his money, but that when she was nineteen, the old man had took it into his head to marry a young wife, and they had a child, and, as was only natural, his niece loved 'em both almost as much as the devil loves holy water. But she had her game to play, she still lived in the same house, and made a show of friendliness. But the young wife took to being consumptive, and died when the youngster was about three years old, and the old man, her husband, took it so to heart that he was quite struck down and seemed like dying too. But the niece knew that he had made a will leaving the child

almost everything, and to her precious little, compared with what she had looked forward to getting before her uncle got married. Then it came into her head that if she could get the child stole away it would be the means of inducing her uncle to alter his will, and that anyhow she couldn't be made worse off by the alteration. That's where the bargain between the niece and the charwoman, Mrs. Sparrow, came in, and the three letters I had got hold of was the result.

"You may guess from Handsome Jack having found out all this in a single week that he had made a good thing of it. He wouldn't tell me how he had managed it—whether he had made Miss —— herself confess it, or whether he had somehow or other got hold of Mother Sparrow, the charwoman, and wormed it out of her. And it was the more important that the secret should be kept, because her old uncle did not die after all, but was still alive, though very feeble. As I have already said, my ankle was that bad I could not put my foot to the ground, so I was obliged to be civil to Handsome Jack, and take his word that as soon as he could get some more money he would make it right with me.

"He came again a week afterwards and he brought me five sovereigns this time, and talked about it being likely that he could square the affair in a short time for five hundred, out of which I should have two hundred and fifty. I was fool enough to begin to think better of him then, and we got quite friendly. I don't remember that I have written it down, but

among the swag I got at the house where I came on the three letters was what I thought was a diamond cross, and knowing if it were good I shouldn't get a quarter its value off the 'fence' I dealt with, I kept it back, but finding afterwards that the stones were only paste, I sold it at a little jeweller's shop in the Whitechapel Road for a trifle. When Handsome Jack came the second time he mentioned about the cross. He told me that Miss —— prized it very highly, and it would make a difference of perhaps fifty pounds if she got it back again. So I told him off-hand—suspecting nothing—whereabouts the shop was where I had sold it, and he went off, shaking hands with me, and promising to come again in three days, 'or,' said he, putting his head in at the door again after he had shut it and looking quite affectionate, 'if I can't possibly come myself, Jimmy, you shall hear from me.'

"So I did, the man-selling thief!

"In three days' time, with me still a cripple with my bad ankle, I had visitors—two policemen and the jeweller chap from the Whitechapel Road, to whom I had sold the cross.

"I was tried for the burglary, and being an old hand they made short work of it at the trial, and I was sent for fourteen years. How Jack Hayesman got penal servitude I neither know nor care. Most likely he served Miss —— as he did his mother, and having brought her to ruin got into trouble himself afterwards working some dodge or other.

"I don't know anything about that; I only know

that I was more pleased than if I had got my ticket, to meet with him in the shelter shed so sudden and unexpected, and the only thing I am sorry for is that I didn't kill him. It's a comfort, anyhow, to remember that crack across the face I gave him, and to know that I've spoilt his claim to be ever again called 'Handsome Jack.' "

THE ADVENTURES OF A WOODEN LEG.

THE following narrative, recently imparted to me, is of so strange a character that I should have felt disposed to question its *bona fides*, only that the narrator is a person whose veracity is beyond suspicion. Moreover, he exhibited to me the very substantial evidence in which the story centres—literally “centres,” as will, in due course, appear.

The said evidence takes the form of a wooden leg. Not what might be called a handsome specimen of that useful instrument by any means, but as disreputable-looking a “peg” as ever beggar-man stumped the streets with. At some period of its career it had sustained a fracture about ankle high, as though the wearer had stumbled with it after accidentally inserting it in a plug-hole or a sewer grating. It had not originally been repaired by an expert, but in a homely way, its splintered parts, which had given way, being bound round with copper wire, while the foot end presented unmistakable symptoms of the leg having been used as a poker to poke a fire with. As a marketable commodity, and supposing a cripple to

be so poor as to be glad to put up with so sorry a substitute for a proper limb, it would probably have fetched twopence or threepence. Yet here it was, enshrined in a receptacle that probably had cost twice as many pounds, the most treasured curiosity in a rich man's library.

A rich man, but not of patrician descent. It will not in the least offend him when he sees this last statement in print. He himself would be the first to proclaim it. He was a kind-hearted gentleman, however, and his benevolence knows no bounds. I made his acquaintance through his writing to me to ask my opinion of a certain charitable asylum for children, and whether it would be well for him to send a hundred pounds towards replenishing its heavily-taxed exchequer. "Since you believe it will be money well bestowed," he remarked in his bluff and cheery way, when I called on him, "why, here goes to write a cheque for the amount, and have done with it. It's a lot of money, though. By George! I should have thought so half a dozen years ago, when I was working confoundedly hard in a wheelwright's shop for five-and-twenty shillings a week, and thought myself lucky if I was allowed to work eight or nine hours overtime, so that I might have an extra crown to take on Saturday. You never heard how I came to make a sudden jump from carrying my dinner to the shop in a 'bundle' handkerchief to having a respectable balance at my banker's? Well, sir, I made that jump by means of a wooden leg."

"Invented a new kind of one, do you mean?"

"No, sir. By taking advantage—as I had every right, mind—of a very old kind of one. I've got it by me, and I wouldn't take a shipload of new wooden legs in exchange for it, each one of them fitted with every modern improvement. Come this way, and I'll show you it."

He led the way to the library, and then, unlocking a costly case of mahogany and plate glass, lifted therefrom the battered and shabby old wooden leg that lay within on its bed of crimson velvet, and placed it in my hands. He bade me thoroughly examine it. I did so, but could make of it nothing more than is above described. While I was handling it, the iron ring at the end dropped off.

Its present owner laughed as he picked it up.

"That happens," said he, "in consequence of the wood being charred and shrunk. I believe the old rascal who last wore it had the bad habit of stirring the fire with it when he was warming his beer. But a couple of nails would put it right. Make a bid for it now!" continued the gentleman pleasantly; "what will you give me for it?"

"Not a shilling," I replied, laughing, "unless you agree to sell with it the magic secret by means of which I may jump into a fortune."

"There is no magic about it now, or secret either," he rejoined. "But there is a queer story attached to it, and if you have half an hour to spare I'll relate it to you."

I remarked that I should very much like to hear it.

"Then you shall; though I hardly know how to begin it."

"It would, perhaps, be best to begin at the beginning," I smilingly suggested.

"No ; that would be to spoil it," he replied reflectively. "We will make a start with Job Crutchly arriving at the Blue Dragon at Brentford, say." [It was not Brentford, nor was the name of the inn the Blue Dragon, but that will be near enough for our present purpose.]

"You will hear more of who Job Crutchly was presently. He was a respectable-looking middle-aged fellow, and he had a wooden leg. It was late in the evening when he arrived at the Dragon in a cab, bringing with him no other luggage besides a small portmanteau. He wished, he said, to stay there for the night—probably for several nights ; it depended on their making him comfortable. They gave him an excellent dinner to commence with, and he took with the meal a pint of old port, and after dinner, having no one to talk with, he beguiled the hours with hot brandy-and-water until it was time to go to bed.

"I may tell you that he had something of an anxious and disturbing nature on his mind, which may account for his unusual indulgence in stimulants. At ordinary times he would not touch spirits half a dozen times in the course of a month. The result was that when he got up to follow the chambermaid he discovered that he was rather unsteady. But, of course, he did not care to mention it, or let it be seen, so he helped himself up-stairs as well as he could with the aid of the banister rails. But the stairs were of the old-fashioned sort, made of oak and polished, and when

Job Crutchly got as high as the first landing, in stepping off the stair-carpet, his wooden leg slipped, and down he came heavily, striking his head against the bottom stair of the next flight. He was insensible when they went to lift him up, and he had cut his head so severely that the doctor was sent for. He was still only partially sensible when they dressed his wound and put him to bed, but the doctor probably saw that the brandy had as much to do with that as the hurt, and gave it as his opinion that his patient would be all right in the morning.

“It didn’t seem so, however, to the kitchen servants next day when they heard him so furiously ringing his bell. He had lain until late—past ten o’clock, and when the boots hurried up with the shaving-water, he discovered the one-legged lodger in such a state of fury that the man’s first impression was that the injury to his head was much more serious than was first supposed, and that he had gone mad. He had nothing on but his night-dress and his trousers, and with his face white as paper, and trembling so that he could scarcely speak, he demanded his wooden leg! ‘How dare they move it out of the room? Who had taken such an unheard-of liberty? Where was it?’ The boots proceeded to explain. He was very sorry if he had done wrong, but when, the night previous, he had unstrapped the leg before he helped put the gentleman into bed, he had taken it down with the odd shoe just to give it a black and a polish. But it and the shoe were now outside the door, and he would fetch them in an instant. The man promptly did as he said, and with the wooden

leg in his hand knelt down so that he might strap it on the lodger's stump, but the instant Job Crutchly set eyes on it, he seized hold of it, and with a passionate exclamation made as though he would brain the boots with it.

"'You infernal rascal, what do you mean?' he cried; 'this is not my leg!'

"'You really must be mistaken, sir,' said the frightened servant, 'it can be no other than the one I took off you last night. We have not another wooden-legged gentleman staying here.'

"But this, instead of pacifying Job Crutchly, only made him more furious, and, hopping to the bell-pull, he tugged at it fit to bring it down, at the same time roaring out at the top of his voice for the landlady. She came hastening up with some of the other servants, and, still in a tremendous state of excitement, Job Crutchly demanded of her the restoration of his property that had been unwarrantably taken out of the room without his permission.

"The landlady appealed to the boots, over whose countenance a puzzling change had come suddenly, and in much confusion he stammered something to the effect that he would go and make inquiry.

"He soon returned, but with a pale and guilty visage. He was very sorry, he said, but he was much afraid that he had discovered a clue to the mystery. The night previous, when he went to the boot-cleaning shed, which was in the yard, to get forward with his work before the morning, a tramping chap came into the yard begging, and being challenged by the boots as to why he didn't

work for a living, the tramp expressed his willingness to do so if he had the chance, and offered there and then to prove it by helping the other with his job of shoes cleaning for an hour for a drop of beer and a bit of bread and cheese. The boots rashly took him at his word, more in pity, as he now explained, for his being a cripple than anything else. The gentleman's wooden leg was there along with the shoes, and the tramp, naturally having an interest in that sort of thing, had taken it up and admired it, and all that poor Joe, the boots, could suppose was, that during the few minutes he was called away to answer the yard bell, the villain must have tried on the gentleman's leg, and finding that it fitted him, and that it was a much better one than his own, kept it on. And then, having polished up the old one, left it in its place.

“ Having thus explained the unfortunate occurrence, the poor fellow again expressed his regret, and handsomely offered, if his mistress would kindly advance him the money, to pay down whatever the gentleman considered the fair value of the missing article. But this offer, rather than appeasing Mr. Crutchly, was as fuel added to the fire of his wrath, which reached such an alarming pitch that it was lucky, perhaps, for everybody in the room he had but one leg to stand on. It was a loss, he declared, that was irreparable. He would rather forfeit twenty or a hundred pounds than not recover the wooden leg. But what must have appeared to them the strangest part of the affair was, that when the landlady suggested that since the gentleman prized his

wooden leg so highly, the shortest way towards recovering it would be to give immediate notice at the police station of the theft, with a description of the thief, he very suddenly cooled down, requesting that no such step might be taken. It would not, he declared, be at all necessary to communicate with the police authorities. It was no great affair, after all, and they would excuse him for the fuss he had been making about it. It was his passionate way. At the same time, he felt really very anxious to get back what had been stolen. He had worn it many years, and it fitted him so nicely. He would give them no further trouble in the matter, however. He was going that day to London, where he had a friend who would make all necessary inquiries. Which way did the rascal go when he walked off with the wrong leg?

"To this last question boots made answer that he couldn't say, it being night-time and dark, but, judging from the tramp's conversation, and his evident familiarity with the lower parts of Westminster, he should think there could not be much doubt as to his residing in that locality when he was at home. But anybody seeking after the vagabond and getting on his track, Joe, the boots, averred could not fail to identify him on account of his beard, which was a mixture of carrotty and white, and his having only one eye as well as one leg.

"Still in a tremendous fluster, though he pretended not to be, when Mr. Crutchly heard this, he at once demanded his bill, and requested the boots to procure him a fly to carry him to Charing Cross.

“‘But, my dear gentleman!’ said the old landlady, ‘what will you do when you get there, with only one leg to walk with?’

“‘Why, don’t you see,’ returned Mr. Crutchly, ‘since my wooden one just fitted the scoundrel who stole it, I suppose I can make shift to limp a little way on the one he has left behind him.’ By the time the fly was ready he had buckled on the tramp’s wooden leg, and without waiting for breakfast took his departure.

“But Mr. Job Crutchly did not tell quite the truth when he said that he had a friend in London who would take all necessary steps to recover his lost property, or if he knew such a friend, he did not apply to him. He had his particular and private reason for seeking personally for his wooden leg, and that very same night he might have been met anxiously exploring the unfashionable regions of Westminster, including Strutton Ground and Chapel Street. He might have been met there, since there he was, but it is doubtful if even an intimate acquaintance would have recognized him in his shabby rig. In his threadbare old clothes, and his old slouch cap, and with the strip of sticking-plaster across his forehead, which had been put on by the Brentford doctor, it was no wonder that he attracted no particular notice as he stumped along from one low public-house to another, seeking among the customers drinking there for a man with a carrotty-white beard, one leg, and one eye.

“He asked no questions concerning the man he was in search of. He could not do so very well,

not knowing his name, and his search was unsuccessful, but he continued it until the public-houses were shutting up, when dog-tired and dead-beat he stumped home to his lodgings. But he was in Westminster again betimes next morning, pursuing the same tactics as the day before, though it was little short of torture to get about on a wooden leg he wasn't used to. But on that day and for several after that he met with no luck, till, late one afternoon, he looked in at a public-house he had already visited a dozen times previously, and he found a man sitting there who remarked, regarding him suspiciously—

“‘Here again, then, old peg-leg?’

“‘Here again,’ returned Crutchly; ‘why not?’

“‘Who are you poking and prying after?’ asked the man.

“‘You wouldn’t know his name if I was to mention it,’ Crutchly answered, thinking it best to be civil. ‘I’m looking after a cousin of mine. I’d stand a drain to any one who would give me the tip where to find him. He is a wooden-legged man, like myself.’

“‘What, and with a mangy beard?’

“‘Carrotty and white. If you call that mangy—yes.’

“‘Ow many eyes?’ asked the man.

“‘One,’ replied Crutchly, with increasing excitement.

“‘Struth, then!’ said the man, laughing, ‘I’ve dropped on a drain cheap. Don’t know that chap’s name, don’t I? Why it’s Leary Reardon.’

“‘To be sure it is!’ responded Crutchly. ‘Where does Leary live?’

“‘Call for the drain, and I’ll try and remember while you are paying for it,’ said the man with a grin. ‘Ah! That’s better. Leary Reardon lives where he always has lived ever since I’ve knowed him, and that’s at 85, Old Pye Street, which is close by here.’

“‘It is a wonder I have not met with him then. I’ve been looking for him hereabouts for a week and more.’

“‘Not at all a wonder. He came back from “circuit” only yesterday. He’s been away these five weeks. But you are pretty sure to find him at home now if you want him pertickler.’

“‘Why am I?’

“‘Because when I met him about a couple of hours since he was so drunk he could hardly stand. It is Leary’s way to go home and have a lay down when he is like that.’

“Mr. Crutchly did not wait to hear any more. He was not long making his way to Old Pye Street, and without difficulty he found No. 85.

“The street door stood open, and some children were playing in the passage.

“‘Which room does Mr. Reardon live in?’ he asked one of them.

“‘In the top back ’un,’ was the reply; ‘werry likely he’s gone to sleep, being drunk. So it’ll be no use your knocking at the door. Turn the ’andle and go in.’

“It was a desperate venture Mr. Crutchly was engaged on, but much—very much—depended on its successful accomplishment. Of course his object was to recover the wooden leg he had been deprived of at Brentford.

"He felt convinced that he had at last succeeded in finding the man he had been so long in search of, and if he was drunk and asleep it would make the carrying out of his, Crutchly's, design so much the easier.

"The first thing now to be ascertained was whether Leary Reardon in his room was alone or in company.

"To assist him in walking Crutchly had a stout oak stick, with a formidable knob. He spat on his hand to make sure of a good grip on it, then, buttoning up his old coat, ascended the stairs.

"Arrived at the top of the house, he cautiously listened at the door of the back room.

"At first he thought that he could make out two voices, but soon came to the conclusion that it was only one voice, and that a tipsy one, and that the sounds were not those of talking, but singing.

"Crutchly tapped at the door with his knuckles, and was bade to come in.

"The occupier of the wretched back room was alone, and a rapid glance convinced the other that here was his man. His ragged beard was a mixture of carrotty and white, and he had but one eye!

"But, what was much more to the purpose, strapped to the stump that was encased in one leg of the cadger's ragged breeches, there was Mr. Crutchly's precious property!

"He could have sworn to it among a hundred, on account of its peculiar shape and make. But it had been most shamefully used since he last set eyes on it.

"It had been splintered and bound up with copper

wire, and worn aslant through acquaintance with rough roads. But this was not the worst of it.

"At the very moment when Mr. Crutchly entered the room Leary Reardon was attending to something he was heating on the fire in a little saucepan, and being probably too drunk to pick up the poker that was lying on the hearth, he had thrust the end of the wooden leg between the bars to stir up the smouldering coals.

"Crutchly's first impulse was to rush at the villain and knock him down with his stick, but thought it prudent to pause. He was by no means a robust man, and had felt anything but well since he had given his head that nasty knock on the hotel stairs at Brentford. The travelling cadger, on the contrary, though of slight build, was a muscular-looking scoundrel, and if he, Crutchly, aimed a blow at him and missed him, he was likely to come off only second best in the scrimmage that was sure to follow.

"All this passed through the visitor's mind during the brief few moments that were occupied by Leary Reardon in leisurely turning about to see who had opened the door. He was in good humour, however, and it was with a smile that he inquired of his visitor who the — he was, and what he wanted. Mr. Crutchly, as I have already informed you, was a cool one.

"‘I beg pardon,’ said he, ‘I’ve come to the wrong room, I see. I’ve been wrongly directed. I was told that I should find a cousin of mine I’m looking for up here. It doesn’t matter. I merely wished to ask him to have a drink with me.’

“‘Bedad, then!’ exclaimed Mr. Reardon briskly, and at the same moment, and much to Crutchly’s relief, releasing the end of the wooden leg from the bars, ‘hain’t it likely, both of us having timber toes, that we may be cousins without knowing it? Anyway, don’t let a doubt of it spile your friendly intention. Where’s the drink you was spakin’ of?’

“‘We’re brothers in distress anyhow, being similarly lopped of a limb,’ replied Mr. Crutchly, falling in with the other’s humour, ‘and we’ll have a drink together.’

“‘Right you are,’ said Leary Reardon, ‘I’ll come wid you.’

“‘Won’t it be better to have a glass to ourselves snug and quiet up here?’ suggested Crutchly. ‘I’ll fetch it. If you haven’t such a thing as a bottle, I can borrow one at the public-house.’

“‘You’re a man worth meeting!’ remarked Reardon approvingly; ‘and listen, old lad! They’re a thavin’ lot at the public-house, and will charge you just as much for the loan of a half-pint bottle as for a pint ’un. So by all means bring a pint, and let it be whiskey.’

“Crutchly willingly complied. His object, of course, is plain enough. Leary Reardon was much more than half drunk already, and if he was judiciously plied and encouraged, a very few glasses of whiskey would make him incapable, and then it would be easy to ease him of the wooden leg he had fraudulently obtained, and make off with it. So he went and bought a pint of whiskey, the strongest on tap.

“But now an unforeseen difficulty presented itself.

Crutchly had reckoned on a couple of glasses being produced to drink the whiskey out of, and he meant to manœuvre with his so as to only make believe to be drinking while Reardon was getting drunk. But the Irish rascal had no such thing as a glass on his premises, nothing at all suitable for the purpose but a cracked teacup.

“‘Never mind,’ said he, ‘we’ll be able to drink fair all the same for that. We’ll each fill up and empty in our turn!’

“There was no help for it. Reardon did honour to his guest by filling him a brimmer for first drink, and Crutchly was compelled to toss it down, hot and fiery though it was. Reardon did the same, smacking his lips with a relish. But, as the other inwardly rejoiced to observe, it was not long ere the effects on the already intoxicated Irishman became apparent. He clasped Crutchly’s hand with a brotherly clasp and started an Irish song, but it was of so pathetic a nature that it made him cry before he had finished the first verse, and Crutchly, to comfort him, promptly poured him out another teacupful of the neat whiskey, which he swallowed, and almost immediately afterwards slipped off his stool into the fender.

“Crutchly’s seat had been a broken old rush chair, and he now rose from it with alacrity, seeing that the moment had come for achieving his purpose. It was not until he attempted to stand up that he was aware of the potency of the cup full of whiskey he had drank. His continuous anxiety had been such that for a week past he had not taken half enough to eat, and hence the rapid effect of the spirit.

"Perhaps, too, the injury to his head may have had something to do with it.

"But he was steadfast to his purpose.

"Leary Reardon, with his head and shoulders in the fireplace, had begun to snore, and he made no resistance at all while the wooden leg was being detached from him.

"Trembling with hope and fear, Crutchly carried the wooden leg to the window, and with the point of his pen-knife lifted out a plug in the upper part of the stem of the artificial limb—just at the spot where the stump of the human leg rested.

"With an involuntary exclamation of exultation, he replaced the plug. His secret was safe!

"Crutchly was now about to make a hurried departure, when it occurred to him that if he was met by any one on the stairs or in the street with one wooden leg as in ordinary and another under his arm it might attract attention. Moreover, he was only too glad to be rid of the horrible thing that had been crippling him for a week past. So he unburdened himself of the cadger's wooden leg and replaced it with his own.

"But Nemesis had her eye on him!

"Eager now to be off, he quitted the room and stumped down the first flight of stairs. But he had taken only two steps down the second, which was long and steep, when his increasing giddiness caused him to make a lurch, which snapped the wooden leg at the place where it had been mended with copper wire, and down he came headlong, and with such a crash that everybody in the house, excepting

Leary Reardon, dead drunk in the fender, must have heard it.

“He was carried out of the house and placed in a cab and taken to the hospital, where it was found that he was grievously hurt, and that several of his ribs were fractured. When he recovered his senses, and was informed, in answer to his anxious inquiry, that his injuries might prove fatal, he lay for a while considering the matter, and then he sent for me.

“Why did he do so? Because I was the individual whom the secret of the wooden leg most closely concerned. Now you shall hear who Mr. Crutchly was.

“He was my uncle’s confidential clerk and managing man, and my uncle was Mr. —, the Army contractor of Pimlico, who after making one will bequeathing all his property to his partner, took it into his head to make another will in secret, leaving everything to me, his only surviving relative. Of this last-mentioned document Mr. Crutchly and another were the witnesses, and its existence was known only to these two. My uncle had died just before Crutchly appeared at Brentford, where I was working, as I have already told you, as a journeyman wheelwright for twenty-five shillings a week. He had concealed the second will in his wooden leg for safety’s sake, and his object was to find me and somehow induce me to make it well worth his while to enable me to prove myself my uncle’s heir. It was from the penitent old rascal’s own lips, as he lay in hospital, that I heard the strange story I have related to you. And

now you can understand why I prize the broken old wooden leg so much."

"And what became of Crutchly? Did he die?"

"No, sir. At the present time he is alive, and deriving as much enjoyment from fifty pounds a year I allow him, with his friends in Lincolnshire, as a man who can get about only with the aid of a pair of crutches can expect."

“ REDBREAST.”

THE Pig and Pullet is not the most genteel tavern to be found east of St. Paul's; neither is its parlour patronized exclusively by polite company. But my object in visiting the place was not a genteel or a particularly polite one. Queer customers was my quest, and a bird-cage maker was the individual who had incited me to search for the same at the public-house in question. His business premises are in Hare Street, which is in the immediate neighbourhood, and our getting into conversation arose out of my calling there to negotiate with him on behalf of a very young relative of mine for a family mansion for white mice. The parlour of the Pig and Pullet, though somewhat crooked, is capacious, and was at one time high in favour with the silk and velvet weavers, who hereabout are thickly colonized.

It was something to be a weaver in those days. Spitalfields goods were at a premium and more in request than any other, and the men held the reins and the masters knuckled under. It was a grave offence against the workmen's rules and regulations for a weaver to work on Mondays, and at holiday

time—Whitsun or Easter—a master thought himself exceedingly lucky if his looms were kept idle no longer than three or four days in the week. The Pig and Pullet was the meeting-place for one of their convivial clubs, and on Saturday and Monday evenings the parlour was crowded with jolly fellows, each good to spend his crown at the very least. There is a woeful difference in these degenerate days ; for a working weaver of that locality to spend a crown now would be to part with half a week's wages, and if he ever looked in at the parlour of the Pig and Pullet on a Saturday night it would probably be to partake of a humble half-pint of fourpenny, which he would eke out to last him as long as he stayed.

It is a house of call for the “fancy,” especially for those whose hobby is singing birds. No doubt it is on that account that Glewberry, the cage maker, uses the Pullet as regularly as he does. There were a good many bird-fanciers in the parlour on the evening when I was there. You could not well mistake them. Each one brought in with him a cage containing his heart's delight tied in a handkerchief, and this he hung on one of a range of nails placed there for the purpose, just over against the chair he sat on. In some cases the bird-cages were uncovered, in others they remained muffled ; but, apparently, it made but little difference to the feathered tenant. As soon as he was hung up and heard the others singing he straightway joined in the already well-nigh deafening bird-concert.

“Speaking of queer customers, the queerest that ever I came across is the chap that is now just

coming in at the door. Jarsper his name is—'Redbreast,' we call him."

The particularly "queer customer," nicknamed the "Redbreast," to whom my attention had been directed by the bird-cage maker, brought no cage in with him. Moreover, he was a sad and unsociable-looking individual, with short cropped hair, and with none of the bird-like perkiness that commonly distinguishes the "fancier" of low life. Mr. Glewberry and I were sitting at the end of the room, where there were fewest people assembled, and the noise the birds made was such that, speaking in a moderately low tone of voice, there was not much danger of what we were talking about being overheard. I hazarded the conjecture that in whatever else the "queerness" of the individual alluded to might consist, he did not look the sort of person who could take delight in little finches.

"He is not a fancier?"

"Well, speaking in a general way," replied Mr. Glewberry, "he is not. You wouldn't reckon to call a man a fancier, any way, who was sweet only on one bird, and that in a pecooliar sort of a way."

"And what bird is that?"

"The robin. That is the one he is nicknamed arter."

"When you say that he is 'sweet' on that particular bird, you mean, I presume, that he admires it for its song before any other?"

The bird-cage maker seemed to masticate my remark, together with the stem of his short clay pipe during several reflective moments, and then he slowly made answer—

"Yes, no doubt that is one view to take of it. But there are them who have known him longer than I have, and they think otherwise."

"How otherwise?"

"There are grounds for their doing so," continued Mr. Glewberry, speaking in a still lower tone, "as for instance, you'd nat'rally think that if a man liked a robin's song he would give that robin a chance of singing it."

"No doubt that would be so."

"But it isn't so. It is very well known and talked about that out of all the robins he's bought—and take all the year round, you might set the number down at least at six a week—he was never known to keep one for a matter of four-and-twenty hours, or to sell it again, or to do anything at all with it, if it comes to that."

"But I don't understand——"

"Being a total stranger, and never having clapped eyes on old Jarsper before in your life, very likely not," Glewberry interrupted me, "it would be a rum 'un if you did. Nobody understands it or can throw a light on it, not even the shoemaker, who lives in the front room, Jarsper occupying the back 'un. He can't throw a light on it."

"Has the shoemaker to your knowledge been questioned on the subject?"

"'Did you ever hear a robin singing in Jarsper's room?' I've asked him, and his answer has been 'Never.' 'Did ever you see one hanging up in his room?' I've further questioned him. 'I'll take my solemn oath,' says he, 'that such a thing hain't

happened once in all the getting on for two years we have lodged in the same house together.' Now what do you think of it?"

"Only this," I replied, "it must be a mistake as to Mr. Jarsper's having a fancy for robins at all."

"Then," asked Mr. Glewberry, slapping his leg, "what does he buy 'em for?"

"You are sure, of course, that he does buy them?"

"I've seen him buy dozens in this very room. He never misses, 'cept when he's hard up, and then, if one is offered to him, he is the most miserable man you ever see. He's that low-spirited you can't get a word out of him."

"The bird-catchers who come here do a good trade with him?"

"They make a mark of him, sir. There's never any call worth speaking of for robins. People are superstitious about 'em, and think they bring 'em bad luck, which so they do," said Mr. Glewberry, shaking his head gravely; "there's no mistake about that. I should reckon that there isn't one fancier in a half-dozen in these parts, or in any other part, that couldn't tell you something about the unluckiness of keeping caged robins—'specially if they have been caught at mating time. Anyhow, the catchers are always glad to get rid of 'em at anything like a price, and Jarsper's price is sixpence. He isn't a man well up for money, but if it's the very last sixpence he's got that's how he'll lay it out if he's got the chance. He don't want to borrow a cage to take a bird home in. He'll put it in a paper bag, and shove it in the bosom of his weskit as tender as though it was a babby, and that is

the last anybody sees of it. From that minute it vanishes."

"And how long has he been in the habit of making these strange purchases?"

"Speaking 'cordin' to my own knowledge," replied the bird-cage maker, "as long as I've knowed him, which is about two years. But I've been told that he began it before that, when he lived out Hoxton way. I know a man who knows Jarsper well, and he tells me that he was took with what you may call his crankiness for redbreasts just at the time when first his wife and then their only young 'un died. If he'd been turned inside out he couldn't have become more altered than he was after that happened."

"Altered for the better?"

A grim grin flitted over Mr. Glewberry's not particularly clean face as he made answer, "Well, 'cordin' as I've been given to understand, it would have took something uncommon powerful to have changed him for the wus, he being up till then just about as bad as they make 'em. 'Bully Jarsper' they used to call him," continued the bird-cage maker, speaking in a whisper, and glancing askance at the individual we were speaking of, and who was now placidly smoking his pipe at the further end of the room. "He's a plasterer's moulds maker, and could earn good money at one time of day, but he liked living on his wife's earnings rather than working, and was always drunk, and fighting, and in trouble with the police. I'm told he used to serve his wife cruel. She might have been alive now, very likely, if it hadn't been for him."

"He didn't have a taste for robins at that time, then?"

"He was one of the sort, sir, who bragged that he didn't care for God, man, nor devil, and that will give you his measure. He cares for robins now, though; but what the blazes he does with 'em after he's bought 'em is a corker."

"Perhaps," I ventured, "he has a taste for them in another way, and cooks and eats them."

The bird-cage maker laughed.

"I've heard some rummy speckerlations as to what becomes of 'em, but never one more unlikely than that of yours. Eat 'em! Why he's that tender in handling 'em you'd think he was afraid of brushing their feathers awry. You ought to have seen a game I saw here atween him and a catcher over a redbreast, and you wouldn't suspect him of killing and eating 'em. He—Jarsper I mean—ain't long got over his illness through that affair. It werry nigh settled him. He broke a blood wessel."

"How?"

"Well, it came about in this way. As I've already told you, having a robin, or p'r'aps two or three of 'em to sell, if a catcher knew where to find Jarsper, he'd wait on him. I've knowed him, before now, when he's been without a penny in his pocket, go out and pawn his silk neck-handkercher for a shilling rather than lose the offer of a couple. Well, the evening I'm speaking of there wasn't many here, it being Friday, when the money is scarce. Jarsper was here, though, and in comes a bird-catcher, more than half-drunk, with a robin in a cage, and he offers it to

Jarsper at the old price. But it happened that Jarsper had no money at all—fact, just before the man came in he had stuck up the price of a pint, promising to pay it next day."

"But you were all friends here. Couldn't he borrow that small sum of one of you?"

"He tried to borrow sixpence, but there wasn't one that was able to do it. So he says to the catcher, 'It isn't the first time we've had a deal together. Let me have the bird, and I'll pay you next time I see you.' But the other was a rough 'un, and he swore at Jarsper for being a cause of disappointment to him. 'I've come half-a-mile to bring it,' he says, 'and if you want it you'll have to pay for it on the nail.' 'I don't want it without the money,' says Jarsper. 'Keep it for us till to-morrow, and I'll buy and pay for it.' But the catcher wouldn't hear of that. 'I've brought it here to get rid of it, and I don't mean to take it away again,' he says. 'If you won't buy it I shall wring its neck, which would be a pity,' he says, 'for it's one of the prettiest I ever see.'

"Hearing this, Jarsper he pricked up his ears and came in a hurry across the room to look at it, and soon as he did so the redbreast began to flutter in its cage just as though it knowed him, and to chirp up at him as though it understood what the chap had been saying about its neck being wrung if Jarsper didn't buy it, and was asking him to prewent it. Leastways, it must have been in some such light that Jarsper took it, for he says to the catcher, in a frightened sort of voice, 'Taint likely you mean it when you talk about killing it. You wouldn't be such a fool.

Save it till the morning and I'll give ninepence for it; or, look here,' he says, taking out his pocket-knife, which was a good 'un, 'take this, and I'll give you ninepence back for it any time.'

"But the other wouldn't listen to anything but payment in ready money. As I've told you, he was half-drunk and one of the bullying sort, and he says, 'Are you going to have it and pay for it now, or am I to wring its neck and chuck it in the fire?' It was rum to see the change that came into Jarsper's face then. It was just as though the mention of fire had burnt him, same as red-hot iron would. He made a snatch at the cage, but the other was too quick for him, and in his drunken passion he gives the little cage one smashing blow with his great fist, of course killing the redbreast inside, and then he catches it up, and makes for the fire-place with it to do what he said he would.

"I believed then, and I believe now, that it was a narrow squeak of Jarsper murdering him. He still had in his hand the knife what he'd offered to part with, and the big blade was open, and before the catcher could get to the fire-place, with it tight gripped in his fist, and with such a cry as I never heard come out of a man's mouth, he makes a spring after him. But he hadn't got half across the room before down he sprawled headlong down on to the floor; and them that helped him up found that he was bleeding from the mouth a precious sight more than if he had only knocked himself in falling. And it was found that it was a wessel he had broke, and he was laid up with it for over two months. He hasn't got his

strength back yet, and some say he never will. He's 'bliged to walk with a stick anyhow, and sometimes he comes over so weak that he's glad if somebody will help him home."

Mr. Glewberry knew nothing further concerning the Jarsper mystery, and having exhausted his present subject he started others, and discoursed in his gossiping way about other queer customers that were in the habit of frequenting the Pig and Pullet.

But I found it impossible to take further interest in the bird-cage maker's conversation. What was the secret of Mr. Jarsper's strange liking for red-breasts, and what his purpose in securing them, even at the inconvenience sometimes of leaving himself penniless, if he did not intend to take care of them afterwards? I was pondering how best to set about making myself master of the odd puzzle when, looking towards the spot where "Redbreast" was just before sitting, I found that he had gone. It was disappointing, but there was no help for it, except my paying another visit to the Pig and Pullet and contriving to get into conversation with him. Good fortune favouring me, however, I was spared this trouble. I remained with the bird-cage maker perhaps a quarter of an hour longer, then bade him good-night, and came away. But I had not proceeded two hundred yards when I came on poor "Redbreast," gasping as he leant against a wall, and evidently in sore need of a helping hand.

In reply to my offer of assistance he feebly remarked that if I would kindly see him across the road he thought he could manage then, as he had

not much further to go. He had been subject lately, he said, to feelings of faintness and giddiness, and, indeed, he hadn't by a long way recovered from a severe attack of illness.

"I have heard about that," said I. "You were so unfortunate as to break a blood vessel."

We reached the further side of the road at this moment, where there was a gas lamp, and my observation caused him to stop and stare at me.

"Why, to be sure," he then remarked, recognizing me in the light. "You was in the parlour at the Pullet just now talking to old Glewberry, and a rare old chatter-mag he is. He mentioned about my breaking a blood wessel, I'd lay a ha'penny. He told you all about it, didn't he?"

"All about your having such an uncommon and unaccountable fancy for robins, do you mean?" I thought it best to put it boldly. "How could he, when he didn't know? All about it, that is to say."

"But he told you a rare rigmarole."

"You are right there. But, unfortunately, he fell short just at the place where the point of real interest of what he was telling me began."

"And what do you call the 'p'int of real interest'?" inquired Mr. Jarsper after a pause. He spoke gruffly, but it was evident from his tone that it was more than idle curiosity that prompted his question.

"Why, naturally," I replied, "the point of interest is the main point, that on which the strange story of the robins turns. There is nothing very uncommon in a man taking kindly to a robin or any other creature that takes his fancy, but the bird-cage

maker informed me that it was generally supposed that your peculiar liking for the redbreast was due, in some way or other, to your having lost a dear little child you were very fond of. I have neither the right nor the desire to pry into your private affairs, but I may tell you that anything that concerns little children has an interest for me, and if you have no objection I should like to know if there is any foundation for the rumour old Glewberry alluded to.”

Perhaps it was because Mr. Jarsper felt more than usually weak and low-spirited that evening that my words appealed more forcibly to him than they would have done at another time. Anyhow, there was moisture in his eyes and a huskiness in his voice as, leaning against the lamp-post, he remarked—

“Mister, did you ever lose a young ’un your heart was set on?”

“That is a trouble, I am thankful to be able to say, has been spared me. But I think I can understand how hard a wrench it must be.”

“What! arter living along with it in lovin’ kindness all its young life, and, I s’pose, and being friends with its mother at all times,” returned Mr. Jarsper, “you would feel it a wrench then to lose it. You just don’t know anything about it, and Lord send you never may. What you’d feel and what I have felt, mister, is no more the same than a pinch with the finger and thumb is to be compared with the pain of a limb screwed tight in a blacksmith’s vice. You lose your young ’un, and, says you, ‘I’d rather anything else in the world had been took away from me; but I got the comfort of knowing that she never wanted for

anything I could give her, and she never suffered ache or pain that might have been prevented. I can lay awake o' nights,' says you, 'and think all about that with an easy mind.' I can't. And that," said Mr. Jarsper, swallowing something in his throat and looking drearily this way and that in the dark street, "that's the hell of it!"

"It is strong language, anyhow."

"It's true language," returned Mr. Jarsper. "That's the word, sir, every letter of it, and therefore, where's the use of using a perliter word that don't answer as well? I don't use it in the way of swearing, nor yet in the light of giving mouth to being ill-used. It's the hell of it, and it's my deservings. Just as she, poor little 'un, has the heaven of it, and that's her deservings. You don't know me, or you wouldn't wonder at my saying it. Old Glewberry, he don't know me, though he's such a liar it's very likely he told you he does as well a'most as though I was his own brother. Did he tell what a thunderin' bad 'un I used to be before—well, before anything pertickler happened?"

"Since you ask me, he told me—not of his own knowledge, but as he himself had been told—that since your loss you had led a more regular life than before."

Mr. Jarsper laughed a dry little laugh.

"That's the gammoning langwidge of perliteneess you're speaking now. Why not out plump and plain with what old Glewberry did say about me? But it don't matter, I'll give you his words. 'Afore his loss,' says he, 'Jack Jarsper was knowed to be a thundering

bad 'un, who was never known to do a good turn to man, woman, or child. He broke his wife's heart,' says Glewberry, 'and he killed his child.' If he told you that, for once in his life he did not tell lies. Damme," said Mr. Jarsper, taking his handkerchief out of his hat to wipe his eyes, "I'm as weak as water; what the deuce do you want to get me on to talk about it for?"

"It wasn't that at all I wished you to speak of, but about the robins?"

"The robins! Her robin, you mean? Why, that's the core of it, and yet you say you don't desire me to speak of it?"

"Not if it is repugnant to you."

"'Pugnant! Who said it was 'pugnant?' and Mr. Jarsper straightened himself. "If that means the same thing as ashamed, let me tell you, mister, that you are wrong and never was wronger. As for having been a bad 'un all along and up to then, it's gone and done, and can't be undone. But I'll tell you what I wouldn't tell for a trifle in that there parlour at the Pullet, 'fear of being laughed at. I got one thing now I can say 'Thank God!' for. It is only a small thing to speak of, but it's a precious lot to me, mister, I do assure you, I can say, 'Thank God!' that I promised her—my little Molly I'm speaking of—wot she asked me just afore she died. I've kep' my word in acting up to it whenever I had the means of doing it as well as I've been able. I mean about the robins."

"Did Molly die first, or her mother?"

"Her mother died a matter of a week first," replied

Mr. Jarsper with a recurrence of the tickling in his throat. "She warn't sorry to, and Lor' A'mighty knows she had no reason to be, being constantly ill-used and hammered at like she was. Her only grief was that she had to leave the little 'un behind her. I was drunk when she died. They called me in, and dear little Moll was on the bed hugging her mother round the neck—twixt three and four year old, she was, and a rare for'ad 'un with her young tongue—and when she see me come into the room, she—the child I mean—seeing me staggerish and looking queer, and knowing what had happened afore when I looked like it, she cried out, 'Don't beat her, daddy! don't beat her! Mammy only wants to kiss you, and say good-bye.'

"I don't ask what I did to be looked over or excused," he continued after a pause of a few moments, "and I only mention that I wasn't sober enough to rightly know what I said, because it is true I was always a jealous fool about the child, who would cling to her mother and shrink from me. So I said in answer to what the child asked of me, 'If good-byes will hurry her going, she can have fifty of 'em. It'll be a blessed good job when she's gone. You'll learn to like me a little then, per'aps.' 'But you will kiss me, Jack?' says my poor gal—the wife I mean—imploring like, and holding out her hands. 'It will be the last time.' But I walked out of the room and banged the door arter me; and when I come home agin she was dead."

"Well, sir," presently resumed Mr. Jarsper in a hushed voice, "I should be telling a lie if I said I was

sorry. I was a brute who couldn't be sorry for anything, but what cut me up and made me feel queer was that the little 'un shrank away from me more than before. She'd let me take her in my arms, but she'd sit like as if she was in a fright, and never say a word, or smile, or move, 'cept when I went to kiss her, and that seemed to mind her of that last time when I had seen her mother alive, and she'd cover her face with her hands and cry out so that they had to take her away from me. She never were wot you could call strong, and she never held up her little head arter the mother was buried, and she never spoke one word to me till just afore she went herself. They told me she was a-going, and I was in the room along with her by myself"—and here Mr. Jarsper again took his handkerchief, but this time it was to wipe his forehead—"by myself, and there come a robin and sat on the window-sill. There warn't nothing in that, 'cause the wife and the young 'un as well was fond of birds, and used to put crumbs out for 'em, and, 'course, in winter time, like it then was, they'd come more frequent. Well, this one come—the robin, I mean—and it tapped at the winder, and though she seemed too weak a'most to move before hearing it, she started up in bed and looked, and then she see it or she see summat; and she clapped her hands, and cried out joyful-like, 'Mammy, mammy! it's mammy come to fetch me!' You won't wonder that I felt skeered. Who wouldn't? 'Lay down, darling,' I says, 'it's only a redbreast.' But she wouldn't listen to me, but seemed sort o' light-headed, and clapped her hands and called, 'Mammy, mammy!'

and the robin it began to sing. 'There, there!' she cried out, 'It is mammy come for me. She said she would, and she has. Oh, don't hurt it! Kiss me, daddy—you wouldn't kiss poor mammy—and say that you'll never, never hurt the little bird that mammy sent to fetch me!' Not four year old;" continued Mr. Jarsper with a shaking hand on my coat sleeve, "and them was her words, as I'm standing here a living man. That's enough of it. Good-night."

"Then, of course, you promised what she asked?"

"She died," said Mr. Jarsper, "a-kissing me and a-hearing me promise it. Good-night."

"And you have kept your word?"

"Hain't I already told you," he replied almost fiercely, "that there's one thing I can say 'Thank God!' for——." But he couldn't get out another word, and turning abruptly away from me, in a few moments was lost in the darkness.

TREBLE GUILT.

WITHIN a mile east of the Monument on Fish-street Hill there resides a parish doctor, to whom I stand indebted for much material useful to a compiler of the more or less "simple annals of the poor." No less observant than kind-hearted, he is a man of skill and shrewd intelligence, and possessed of an excellent memory for the details of the strange events that not uncommonly occur within the scope of his daily duties. The last time I called on him to ascertain if anything remarkable had transpired among his patients since we last met, he replied, after some reflection—

"Nothing in particular that I remember, unless you would regard it as remarkable that a blind man, as peaceable a fellow by all accounts as ever stood at a street corner begging alms, should suddenly, and without apparent cause, grow frantic at the sound of the voice of a passer-by, and pursue him furiously with his stick. If that, in your opinion, is an occurrence that deserves to rank with the uncommon, I have, to that extent, since we last shook hands, added it to my museum of natural curiosities."

"It can scarcely," I remarked, "be regarded as an every-day occurrence; but how could a blind man pursue an enemy in a crowded thoroughfare without coming into collision with all manner of obstacles and getting hurt?"

"I don't know how he could, and I don't intend to endeavour to prove the possibility, by evidence provided by the case in question, at all events," returned my medical friend, smiling. "The individual I allude to was much hurt, and is in a bad way, poor fellow. It was a mistake to take him home instead of to the hospital."

"And rather an uncommon mistake, I should say. A beggar, blind or with eyes to see, who meets with a street accident does not usually have much to do with the ordering of what shall be done with him; the police usually look after all that sort of thing."

"So they were ready to do, but some one interfered to prevent it, I am told."

"Who was the somebody?"

"That is an odd feature of the case," continued the doctor, after a reflective pause. "It seems that it was the very individual, the sound of whose voice made the blind man frantic, who took charge of him and had him taken home. I don't know very much of the particulars of the case at present, for I have attended the patient but twice; but, from what I have gathered, it seems that the blind man was at his usual post, saying nothing, but simply holding out his hand, as was his custom, when some one passing that way suddenly stopped before him and exclaimed—

“‘Good God! Rokeby, is it you?’

“And then, all in an instant, the whole manner of the man—the blind one, I mean—changed, and, with a horrible oath and swearing that he would have the other’s life, he flourished his stick and made a rush at where he supposed his enemy was standing, striking out left and right, and, before he could be restrained, blundered into the road and under the wheels of a cart that unfortunately was rather heavily laden. I can’t quite say yet if there is anything more amiss, but he has broken some ribs and one hip is much hurt.”

“And this person, who roused the blind man’s passion by addressing him by name and exclaiming ‘Good God! is it you?’ he, you say, was the one who caused the injured man to be attended to?’

“Provided a cab for him, and gave the cabman a half-sovereign to make amends for the soiling of the cab cushions. It was remarkable, however, that he made no endeavour to convince the blind man that he had made a mistake. Indeed, all that he afterwards did in his behalf was, I am told, by signs, or in low whispering, seemingly lest the other should again hear his voice and take offence at it.”

“And what account did this generous stranger give of himself?”

“No account at all as far as I am aware of. He has not since been seen or heard of.”

“He did not accompany the blind man in the cab to his home, then?”

“He did not. It was supposed that he intended to do so, as he got up on to the outside seat with the

cabman. But he seems to have altered his mind on the road, and to have told the driver to proceed to the address that had been given him, and he, the stranger, would follow shortly. By-the-bye," continued the doctor, "when I say that he has not since been heard of, that probably is not correct, since within a few hours of the injured man's arrival home a registered letter was received enclosing a five-pound note, with a single unsigned line in writing intimating that the money was for Mr. Rokeby. I think it must have been sent by the man we are speaking of."

"But about Mr. Rokeby. He resides in your parish, and stands to beg, you say, at one particular spot in the High-street. Were you ever brought into communication with him before this accident?"

"Yes. I previously knew something of him, but not very much. He has lived in this neighbourhood not much more than a year, I should think. I first made his acquaintance soon after he came out of Poplar Hospital, where he was an inmate for a very considerable time, when he lost his eyesight. If you ask me how he lost it I cannot tell you. There certainly was something mysterious about that. He has been, I should say, a good-looking fellow in his time. He is now probably not more than about thirty years old, and his blindness was evidently caused by some violent injury and not by disease. His face is terribly disfigured. His nose is broken, and there is a jagged scar extending across his brow. It appears as though occasioned by a fall on rocky ground from a height or by a single blow with a heavy club."

"How does he himself account for the loss of his eyes?"

"He declines to account for it. The first time I attended him at his abode for rheumatism, to which he is much subject, I asked him the question, and his strange answer was, 'I never knew, sir, how I became blind, and probably never shall.' And on my remarking that I doubted as to his speaking the truth, since it was plain that the injury was of comparatively recent infliction, and could scarcely have been of a nature to be soon forgotten, he gruffly made answer, 'You asked for the truth and it has been given to you. I know no more about it than that I was struck blind. It may have been the devil himself who did it. I should think it not at all unlikely, considering who it was he was befriending,' he added savagely. 'One thing is certain, if I hadn't been struck blind, somebody else would have been struck dead.'"

"Did he tell you who that 'somebody' was?"

"He became more furious than before when I pressed him on that point, and took to abusing me at such a rate for prying into his private affairs that I have never touched on the subject since."

"But you have been frequently called in to attend him. Is he married?"

"He is not, and he is laid up so frequently, poor fellow, with acute rheumatism, that I believe he would often be in want of food were it not for another lodger in the same house. And the most curious part of it is, as far as she is concerned, that the woman in question is deaf and dumb."

"An acquaintance of his—a relative perhaps?"

"Nothing of the sort. She never saw him until he was discharged from the hospital and took lodgings where he is living now. He—Rokeby, I mean—had a little money then, and used to pay me for my professional visits, and it was not necessary for him to beg in the streets. He had not been at the house more than a week when the deaf and dumb woman, who had a little child with her, came with another woman, and inquired concerning a room there was to let, and engaged it, and goodness only knows why—certainly not on account of his prepossessing appearance—she at once exhibited the greatest sympathy for the poor helpless blind man, and from that time, and ever since, she has been his self-appointed nurse and good friend, and keeping his room comfortable, and very often—as I have reason to know—in hard times sparing much more than her scanty means justify in procuring him, when he is ill, nourishing things that he would otherwise have to do without. You will scarcely be surprised that I take more than ordinary interest in the nurse as well as the patient," continued the doctor, "when I tell you that she is not deaf and dumb in reality, but simply pretends to be."

"Pretends, did you say?"

"I should say there can be little doubt of that, though why she should——! Upon my word," he broke out laughingly, after another pause, "I begin to think that there is really more that is remarkable in the business than I at first supposed. The fact is, I have been so busy during the past few days

that I have had no leisure to consider it in all its bearings. Here is a blind man, who makes a mystery of how he became so, and who gets run over and perhaps fatally hurt, in consequence of his being roused to fury by a few brief words addressed to him by a stranger, and, in addition to this, we have the sightless patient being most carefully nursed and attended to by a woman whose interest in the latter is noticeably more than neighbourly, and who, I verily believe, is shamming to be deaf and dumb. Why is she doing so, I wonder?"

"That," said I, "appears to be a question easily answered."

"How so?"

"Living in the same house with a blind beggar man would seem to bespeak that she is of the same class. In that case, it is not very remarkable that she should affect an affliction for business purposes."

"On the contrary," said the doctor, "she is a respectable hard-working woman. I can't inform you whether she has a husband or whether she is a widow. And, as I have already informed you, she has a child—a pretty little creature three or four years old—nicely dressed and well cared for. It was with the mother in the sick man's room the last time I paid a visit there, which was this morning. I shall call there again this evening about seven o'clock, and it will not be my fault if I do not discover a clue to the puzzle. I am on friendly terms with them, and I think I can manage it. If you happen to be coming this way to-morrow you shall hear the result."

But I felt so curious to learn something more of

the mystery that Dr.— had introduced me to, that I could not wait until the morrow, and about eight o'clock that same evening I called at his abode. He had not yet returned, but had sent word to his assistant that he was unexpectedly detained in Crowder-street, and should probably be engaged there for at least an hour. I was aware that the blind man resided in Crowder-street, and I forwarded a message to my medical friend that I was impatient to learn what he had discovered, and should wait at his house until he returned. To this I got a quick reply per special messenger :—

“There is something here I think will interest you. It is a queer business, this of Rokeby's, altogether ; much more so than there were reasons for suspecting. I shall be glad to have you with me for an hour. It will be all right. I will introduce you to the company you will find here. Return with the bearer of this note and he will bring you to the house.”

I lost no time in responding to the doctor's strangely-worded invitation, and, accompanying the messenger, was speedily at the domicile where Mr. Rokeby lodged. I was directed by a person I met in the passage to go up to the second floor back room. I proceeded thither, but hesitated to knock at what should have been the right door in consequence of hearing the voices of men in angry altercation within.

“I have been tricked and cheated !” one voice exclaimed in accents of terror. “I have been induced to come here by means of fraud and treachery. How am

I to trust you ! How can I tell but that even should I do all you require you will release me and let me go ? ”

“ You may be sure of one thing,” said another voice, “ your only chance of keeping whole bones in your skin is to comply with my request. Good God ! man, is it too much, do you think, to ask of you, after the villainy you had been guilty of ! After the misery, the irreparable ruin that has been caused by your devilish spited malice ? ”

Then I knocked at the door, which was locked. I could hear the key turned, by the doctor himself.

It was a strange sight that met my gaze. The room, though very poorly furnished, was scrupulously clean, and at one side was a bed, the occupant of which with his blind eyes and his much disfigured face I had no difficulty in recognizing as my friend’s patient. Beside the bed sat a young woman, still good-looking, though with a care-worn and long-suffering expression of face. I recognized her at once as the female the doctor had mentioned, and who pretended to be without hearing and speech. At the other side of the bed was the “ company ” the doctor had made mention of it in his note—the two men whose voices I had heard while I was outside the door. The one, a fine, manly-looking young fellow, flushed and excited, and with his coat buttoned, and his cuffs turned back as though he had recently been engaged in a tough struggle ; the other, a mean and abject-looking creature of dwarfish stature, with a face white as paper, and evidently shrinking under the clutch the first man had on his collar and afraid for his very life.

It appeared as though I was expected, for no one there seemed surprised to see me, the deaf and dumb woman merely rising from her chair to give me a respectful greeting, while the man who had the other by the collar remarked civilly—

“You, sir, are a friend of our good doctor, I understand. We have been expecting you. Indeed, the little affair we have in hand has been delayed at the doctor’s request until your arrival. The fact is, we begged of him, as an honourable and trustworthy gentleman, to hear certain statements that will presently be made, and which it is best should be heard by a disinterested witness. It is the doctor’s suggestion that two witnesses in such a case will be better than one. Therefore, he has sent for you, and speaking for myself I am thankful to you for your prompt response, since the sooner our unpleasant business is began and finished the better.”

I intimated that I was quite satisfied to place myself in my friend Dr. ——’s hands, feeling sure he would not ask of me anything to which I should not assent. “At the same time, gentlemen,” I smilingly remarked, “your preparations appear to be somewhat alarming. Why the locked door?”

The door having been relocked by the doctor when I was admitted, the key was given to the young man, who placed it in his pocket.

“The door is locked, sir,” replied the latter, “lest this villain,” and he gave the dwarf a wrench that well-nigh lifted him off his legs—“should endeavour to make his escape before we have done with him, which would be a pity,” he added, with a grim smile,

"after all the pains I have been at to inveigle him here, and to drag him up-stairs when he got as far as the street door, and becoming suspicious refused to come any further. Allow me to introduce him to you, sir. His name is Hext—Sibley Hext—wharfinger's clerk of Rotherhithe, and as wicked a rascal, as I will presently show, as ever blighted a good woman's fair name or misled his friend to ruin by treachery and fraud."

It was unmistakable to whom he alluded when he spoke of the good woman whose fair fame had been blighted, for he looked towards her as he spoke, and she, now standing at the bed-foot, glanced scornfully at Sibley Hext.

"And, may I ask," I remarked, "who you are?"

"My name," he said, "is Raymond, and I am a shipwright by trade. I am the man at the sound of whose voice suddenly addressed to him in the street poor Rokeby here became so much enraged. It was through me that he was knocked down in the road. More than that, in your presence, sir, and that of the doctor I confess that it was my hand—and may God forgive me!—that deprived him of sight."

It was evident, notwithstanding that Raymond and the blind man were no longer at enmity, not only had Rokeby ceased to take offence at his voice, but was so far reconciled to him that as he uttered these last words his hand sought that of the young shipwright—and giving it a squeeze, he fervently responded—

"May God forgive you as I do, Jack. But we are wasting time that may be precious to the gentleman for whom the doctor has sent. Where is Hext? Let

the scoundrel speak. But keep him away from me, Jack. Do not let him come within arm's length of my bed, or it may happen that I shall do murder, after all, before I die."

"The matter will be better understood," Raymond responded, "if I first explain how matters stood among all the parties concerned before this little viper spat his spite on us. Take us as we were three years ago. Philip Rokeby, to begin with, had been nearly two years married to a young woman whose name was Jessy Carson." (Here the woman who had passed as being deaf and dumb, who may have guessed the name he mentioned by the movement of his lips, turned away from us with a stifled moan, and stood with her elbows resting on the mantel-shelf and her face hidden in her hands.) "Jessy Carson had been my sweetheart before she was his. It was no secret. Phil was well aware of it, and it made no difference in our friendship as shopmates, when she grew tired of me and threw me over to take up with Phil. She acted like a sensible girl when she did so. It may be true that I was a smart workman, and could earn good wages when I liked, but it very often happened that I did not like. I was far too fond of pleasure to make a steady husband, and a bit of a devil-may-care into the bargain. As for Phil Rokeby, though a year or two older than me, he was a better match for her, he was sober and respectable and had saved a goodish bit of money, enough to provide them with as comfortable a home as a working couple could wish to start in life with. Phil had only one drawback—he could neither read

nor write. That, to him, as it proved, was a bitter misfortune."

"It was my curse," remarked the blind man woefully; "but for that all this misery never need have been. My poor, dear Jess! You wrongfully accuse yourself, John Raymond, when you say that it was you who blinded me. I was blind before. Stone, blank blind, I must have been."

"I have said," Raymond resumed, "that Jessy Carson and myself were on sweethearting terms before she became Phil Rokeby's wife. But in her courting days she had another admirer beside we two. No other than this beauty here."

And still keeping his iron grip of Sibley Hext's jacket collar as he uttered these last words, he hauled him up as easily as though he had been a mere boy, so that only his toes touched the ground, and so exhibited him, ghastly pale and limp, to all present.

"You would think it hardly possible, perhaps," Raymond continued with a derisive laugh, "but it is a fact. This wretched atomy, this crooked little animal, presumed to fall in love with as good and as handsome a girl as there was to be found in Rotherhithe. But it was in secret. I should tell you, gentlemen, that he and Phil Rokeby were not strangers. He was beholden to Phil's father, who was foreman at the yard where we both worked, for the way he had made in the world. He—this Hext here—was picked up by Phil's father, a starving little river-side waif, and fed and cared for by him, and sent to school, and when he was old enough a stool was found for him in the counting-house of the

firm. You shall hear presently how he showed his gratitude.

"He never as much as hinted that he was in love with Jessy Carson, and she never knew it, but all the same for that he was full of envy and hatred, first against me who was keeping company with Jessy, and then against Phil Rokeby who courted her and became her husband. And here he is to explain the devil's mischief he wrought, and the plan he laid to bring us all three—Phil, and his wife, and me—to ruin and misery. And now speak out, Sibley Hext, or you know what you may expect. You haven't forgotten our little arrangement, I know."

It did not seem as though he had, for he proceeded to obey with alacrity. He was anxious, however, to make one stipulation.

"You will keep your word as a man, John Raymond, and let me go when I have spoken."

"You have my promise for that."

"And you will never molest me, or set any one on to molest me, afterwards?"

"You are wasting time. You know quite well that that is promised too."

He was released now from the hold Raymond had on him, and, as though mindful of the blind man's remark as to its being best for him to keep out of his arm's length, Sibley Hext shuffled across the room and stood by the door, ready to escape by the stairs the moment it was unlocked.

"I shall be no doubt derided and laughed at," he began, in a dry voice, and always careful to look

away from that part of the room where the deaf and dumb woman, with her face hidden, was still standing by the fire-place, "when I declare that for my conscience's sake"—(at this the blind man growled an imprecation, and John Raymond impatiently snapped his finger and thumb)—"for my conscience's sake, I say, I am glad that matters have come to this pass. I admit all that is laid to my charge, but, without desiring to excuse myself, may I not be allowed to plead my——well, my great regard, let me say, for Jessy Carson in extenuation! I am not speaking of Phil Rokeby's wife, remember, but of the young woman when she was single, and free to marry whom she chose. You, John Raymond, fell in love with her, and for all my being the 'crooked little animal' you name me, I had eyes to admire and a heart to feel, and I, too, loved her, and being capable of love I was likewise capable of jealousy. There you get the whole thing in a nutshell, if I may so express it. Phil Rokeby so loved his wife that he would have murdered her in his jealousy had he not been prevented. I loved Jessy Carson, so that my jealousy of you two made me a devil, and to act like one.

"I confess that I purposely misled Phil Rokeby. I was his close friend, and he trusted me more than any other. He brought to me a letter he had discovered by accident in a secret drawer in a work-box, belonging to his wife. It was one of your letters to her, John Raymond, the last one you ever wrote, and an answer to the last one she ever wrote to you. In it you told her that much as you loved her you could not but feel that you were not worthy

to be her husband, and that since she desired to be released from her engagement to you, you could, as a man, do no other than consent. The letter was more than two years old, but it had been so well kept that it seemed as new as though it had been posted but a short time before. And that it was that put the devilry into my head.

"You was always a jealous man, Phil Rokeby; and though you could neither read nor write, you knew the writing was John Raymond's, and you came to me to get me to read it for you. You were ashamed to ask me. 'Only that I know that I could trust you with my very life, Sibley Hext,' you said, 'I would not make such a request. I hate myself,' said you, 'for doing such a mean and paltry thing. I swear to you that I have no more doubt of her truth and honesty than I have that you stand alive before me at this moment. But what can it mean? Why does he write to her now that she is married and a mother, and why does she treasure his letter in secret?'

"It was a chance that the quick-grasping devil within me could not miss. I took the letter and read it, and with make-believe emotion I gave it back into Phil Rokeby's hands. 'Take it,' I said, 'and put it back where you found it. I dare not read it to you. You do not know, poor fellow, what you ask when you press me to do it.' 'I found it,' says you, 'in a secret drawer in her work-box.' 'It would have been almost better for you,' I made answer, 'if it had been a viper you had discovered instead of this infernal letter, and it had stung you to death when you touched it.'

"But you would know the contents of the letter, and you begged and entreated until I pretended to yield. What I made known to you was a concoction of lies. I read the writing so as to make it appear that all along and ever since you were married, there had been love and secret correspondence between your wife and you, John Raymond; and you, John, was made to intimate that the little child was your own."

Except for an occasional sobbing sound from the woman who was still leaning by the fire-place, Hext's narration, as far as it had proceeded, was listened to amidst dead silence. But at this point of it, with startling suddenness, the blind man rose in bed to a sitting posture, his scarred and sightless face hideous to behold, contorted, as it was, with passion.

"Give—give me a drink of water, or I shall be choked," he exclaimed, in a voice so dry and harsh that it seemed nothing like that he had previously spoken in, "or, better still, bring him close enough for me to get a grip on him. Do me that great favour, Jack Raymond, I beg of you!"

But the doctor and Raymond between them managed after a while to soothe him. When he had swallowed a draught of water he lay down again.

"Remember," continued Sibley Hext, who during the blind man's furious outburst had got closer to the room door, and now stood with one hand grasping the knob of the door lock, "remember, all present, that I have been forced to this confession, and that I make it under compulsion and threats. It was you, John Raymond, who insisted on it!"

"And do so still," returned the young shipwright, sternly. "Out with it all, Judas. Keep nothing back. We are listening."

The woman reputed to be deaf and dumb had not changed her position since she turned away, seemingly in loathing, from the dwarf. She still stood leaning by the fire-place with her back towards us, and even when, as occasionally happened, she half-turned her head to glance solicitously at her patient in bed, the handkerchief that was worn in hood fashion over her head partially concealed her features.

It was observable, however, that each time she did this Sibley Hext turned his eyes in her direction, and though it might well have been that his whole mind was fixed on the dastardly "confession" he was making, it was evident that there was something about the woman that sorely perplexed him and diverted his attention. Indeed, it seemed partially due to the last-mentioned circumstance that his revelation at this point was not so quickly resumed or so smoothly related as it otherwise would have been.

The deaf and dumb woman seemed to be aware of Hext's inquisitive glances, and perhaps it was on that account that she went to the window and so adjusted the curtain as to lessen the light in the room.

Raymond, standing at the bed-side, holding one of the blind man's hands in his own, with an impatient gesture intimated to Hext to proceed.

"I have but little more to relate," the latter presently resumed, first moistening his parched lips with

his tongue. "As I was telling you when you interrupted me, when I read aloud, or rather pretended to read, to Phil Rokeby the guilty letter he believed had been sent but a few days previously to his wife by John Raymond, he was well-nigh beside himself. For several minutes he appeared to be quite stupefied, and stood blankly staring before him without uttering a word or a sound, and then his terrible rage found vent in a storm of curses and threats of vengeance against Raymond and his wife, and he swore that he would kill them both before he slept that night."

"Good God, man!" the doctor broke in at this juncture, "do you mean to tell us that you were that malicious and black-hearted that you could stand by and witness such agony as the poor fellow must have endured? Having every reason for believing that it was groundless, did it not occur to him that you might be deceiving him?"

"You see, sir," remarked John Raymond with a bitter laugh, "our poor friend here, Philip Rokeby, trusted Mr. Hext so implicitly! He had long been his bosom friend and counsellor. Mrs. Rokeby, too, knew and trusted him."

"That is so," returned the dwarf with an ill-concealed vindictive glance at the last speaker. "She knew me. Indeed, I have often thought that it was owing to my having such frequent opportunities of talking with her, and hearing her laugh and sing, and of witnessing generally how happy she was in her home, that kept alive my tormenting jealousy. You see, gentlemen" (addressing the doctor and myself), "ours was no common friendship. I knew both of

them well before they were married. She was not aware at the time that Phil was no scholar; he was ashamed to tell her, and I used to write his love-letters for him and read to him those she sent in return. Who, then, can wonder at what resulted? I appeal to you two gentlemen, who can take a calm and dispassionate view of the matter, if I fell in love with Jessie Carson was it any other than natural? or, rather perhaps I should say, if I at first only admired her for her pretty ways and for her handsome face, for she *was* handsome, was it more than was to be expected that my feelings of affection for her should grow warmer when actually I was writing words of love to her and reading—though she never knew it—the tender replies that were intended only for her dear sweetheart's eyes. It was I who wrote to her, not in his—in Phil Rokeby's language—but in my own, and what she wrote back seemed to be addressed to me, and I took it to heart as such; and if I was made madly jealous when they got married where is the marvel?"

All through Hext had maintained the whining tone of make-believe remorse and penitence with which he started, but in what degree he was sincere was shown by this last insolent reference to his ingrained villainy. The blind man writhed in his bed, and John Raymond, with a muttered imprecation and his fist clenched, made a step towards him.

"Let us have no more in that strain, you infernal scoundrel," he passionately exclaimed, "or I shall forget my promise of forbearance and make short work of you."

"It is only the truth I am stating," returned the dwarf, still whiningly, but with his deep-seated malice plainly visible in his eyes; "it was your own bargain with me, John Raymond, that I should speak the truth and nothing else; therefore why do you blame me? I was Philip Rokeby's trusted friend, I say; that is, he regarded me as such, and he looked to me for counsel and advice in the heavy affliction that had fallen on him. Was I certain sure, he wished to know, that I had made no mistake in reading the letter—that I had not overlooked some little word that would rob the matter of its damnable complexion? And to satisfy him I looked at it and repeated again, word for word, all that I made believe before was in the letter. Then he grew deadly calm. 'Hext,' said he, 'you must stand by me in this. You have a wiser head and a better one for scheming than I have. You must help me in my revenge, so that it may be quite complete.'

"'How, complete?' said I; 'what do you mean?'

"'There must be a plan,' he replied, in such tones that I could have no doubt that he was in earnest, 'so that I can catch them together and kill him in her sight, and take her life afterwards.'

"I begged him to do nothing rashly. I even went so far as to plead for mercy for his wife, and to try and convince him that she was probably far less to blame than Raymond. This, as I confess I expected, exasperated him the more, and he swore that I was in league against him, and he struck me in his mad fury. I wanted an excuse for destroying the letter, and this gave it me. Of course if I had permitted him to

retain the letter my scheme of jealous vengeance against all concerned must have come to nothing, since the next person he showed it to would have opened his eyes to the cheat that had been imposed on him. 'D—— you!' he exclaimed, 'so you too would screen her? Perhaps you have the same reason for so doing as that treacherous thief, Raymond? Maybe you, as well as he, are in love with her, and she with you?' and he laughed contemptuously, as he added, 'By all that's good, I shouldn't be surprised if, base as she is, she had degraded herself and me even to *that* extent!'"

"He showed his judgment there, at all events," observed John Raymond.

"It was a cruel stroke," continued Hext, not heeding the interruption, "and if he had been in his cool senses he would never have dealt it at me. But I was not sorry, since it strengthened me in my purpose. 'I do not love your wife, Phil Rokeby,' I said, 'but I love you, and you may kill me if you will, but I will compel you to think this matter over calmly. With such evidence as this—the letter I meant—in your possession, you will be goaded to do murder within this hour. Without it, having nothing to show to justify you for killing her or him, it is best destroyed.'

"And before he could prevent it, I crumpled up the letter and thrust it into the fire.

"I dared not stay another instant in the office with him. I should have been safer with a wild beast. I ran out and he made some attempt to follow me, but abruptly altering his mind he turned and hurried out of the yard.

"I never saw him from that day until this, or knew what shape his vengeance took, or what became of him or his wife, or you, John Raymond. You all three vanished as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed you. But I could not be sure that one or other—all three, perhaps—might not presently come back to confront me, so that I had not the courage to remain in my employment. I left it suddenly, and went away from London, and led a wretched wandering life for months. It has not been much better with me since I returned, as you, John Raymond, may judge from the wretched place you found me living in when yesterday you so unexpectedly pounced on me. And that is all I know, and all I have to tell, so help me God, and as I hope for forgiveness hereafter. Now unlock the door and let me go, John Raymond,—you, you know, are a man of honour, and I hold you to your word."

"That depends entirely on your having spoken the truth," returned Raymond, "and of that only this poor fellow can decide. What say you, Phil Rokeby?"

"I say," replied the blind man, in a voice that betokened his immeasurable hatred for the enemy who had so wronged him, "as far as my memory may be trusted that that viper in human shape, Sibley Hext, has given a correct account of his villainy, and I further say that I most fervently hope and pray that he may suffer as I have suffered. May lingering days and sleepless nights of agony such as through him I have for these long years endured be his portion until death and the devil claim him. Now let him go."

Raymond taking the key of the door from his pocket, flung it towards him.

But his moment of release had not yet arrived.

Before he could pick up the key, eager as he was to do so, the woman, who all the time had stood leaning against the fire-place with her back towards us, sprang forward and recovered it, at the same moment throwing back the handkerchief with which her head had been hooded, and confronting him with her uncovered face within a foot of his. Sibley Hext gazed at her in fright, and would have given utterance to something, had not Raymond strode forward and clapped a hand over his open mouth.

"One word," he whispered in his ear, at the same time threatening him with his big fist clenched, "and I will send your teeth down your coward's throat. Quiet. Lie there until you have leave to get up!"

Hext had dropped down on to his knees in his anxiety to recover the key, and with a push with his foot Raymond sent him sprawling over, and there he lay crouched by the door in terror and dismay, while the woman, with her face no longer concealed, went and stood by the blind man's bed-side, having first more comfortably arranged the pillows.

He was instantly conscious of her being near him, and her hand touching his, he grasped it, saying in a low voice as he did so, "God bless you for your kindness to me. You cannot hear my words, but from the bottom of my heart I am truly, deeply grateful to you. It was His providence that sent you to befriend me in my helplessness when I had so wickedly driven away my dear innocent wife, to pine

in poverty with our dear child,—perhaps,” he added in tremulous tones, “to die, maybe, in some far-away workhouse, and be buried in a pauper’s grave.”

There were tears welling from his blind eyes, and she tenderly wiped them away with her handkerchief and permitted him to retain his hold on her hand.

“Gentlemen,” presently spoke John Raymond, “I will, if you will permit me, trespass a little longer on your time and patience, so that you may hear the whole of this strange story, and be enabled to speak as to the teller of it should you ever be called on to do so.

“I take up the narrative at the point where yon scoundrel leaves it. Phil Rokeby rushed away from Hext’s office intent on a double murder. In the mad rage and jealousy excited by that villain’s treacherous misreading of the letter, he needed no further evidence of his wife’s guilt or of mine. Happily she was from home when he returned to look for her. It was by merest accident that I heard of his threats of vengeance against her. They employed a little girl to mind their baby, and she was in the house when Rokeby came in, white with fury, and asked for her mistress, calling her a horrible name. She—Mrs. Rokeby I mean—was away at Deptford at her mother’s, and there her husband followed her, taking from a drawer and putting in his pocket, before he started, a Spanish dagger-knife in its sheath. It was the girl that told me of this, on my happening to meet with her in the street a few minutes after Rokeby was gone, and as he and I were on friendly terms, and I thought that

perhaps he had been drinking, though he was generally a sober man, I thought I would go after him and perhaps prevent further mischief.

“Just, however, as I reached Deptford Railway Station I saw them—Rokeby and his wife—on the down platform, and about to enter a carriage as though they were going for a few miles’ journey towards Kent for an afternoon’s amusement. But although she did not appear to notice it, bearing in mind what the little girl had told me, there was that in the expression on his face that fairly frightened me, and, still with friendly intent, I made haste to the other side and took a ticket for their train. I did not join them in their carriage, but entered the next one and kept watch at the window, and saw them alight at a station about twelve or fifteen miles down the line. It would have been better if I had got in the same carriage, but not having done so, it occurred to me, knowing what a jealous fellow poor Phil was, that he might think it strange my following them, so I resolved to keep out of his way, but, if possible, to keep an eye on him. They passed within a yard of me, going out at the station, and she must have been aware of his strange demeanour, though he affected to be in high spirits.

“They went away down the road, and towards a stretch of forest, he still laughing and talking and walking a few steps ahead, and not at a slow pace either, but as though he was going somewhere and knew where. I was a goodish way behind them, but when he turned his head to speak to her I could see how white his face was, and I thought of the dagger-

knife. Moreover, I observed that he kept his right hand always in his jacket pocket.

"They went into the wood—to the thickest part of it, and now I was able to get closer to them, though I kept on the higher ground. After a while they sat down, and he seemed at once to commence to quarrel with her. I could not hear what was said, but she seemed bewildered and annoyed, and as though she did not know how to answer what he was saying to her. At last he seemed to say something that roused her to anger, and she rose from his side suddenly and made as though to leave him.

"I had not the least idea until that moment that I was the subject of or in any way concerned in their disagreement. How could I have when I had never had a wrong word with either of them, and that very morning had been in Phil's company on our usual friendly terms? But when she so hastily got up from the tree stump they were both sitting on, I heard her exclaim, 'You must be mad, Phil, to say such a thing to me. John Raymond! why, may Heaven forgive you, man, were it with my last breath I could swear that since you and I were married he has never given me word or look that could offend you.'

"'Ay, ay!' I heard him reply in jeering response, 'there comes in a woman's craft. He may never have *said* a word that would offend me, but how many words has he *written* to you that a honest wife should die of shame to be reminded of?'

"'Not one,' said she. Then, with a cry of fury long pent up, but allowed vent at last, he sprang to his feet and grasped her wrist.

“‘You lie!’ said he, ‘you lie! What about the secret drawer in your work-box!’

“I could see her face, for the sun was shining on it, and it was easy to note the change in its expression as her madly jealous husband uttered these last words. It was almost a laughing face that she turned to him—to him, with his right hand still plunged in his jacket pocket, and gripping what was hidden there. She remarked calmly—

“‘Well, Phil, and what about the secret drawer?’

“‘What about the letter hidden there?’ he made answer. ‘Dare you deny that it was his letter and addressed to you?’

“Poor innocent woman! She did not know the edge of the precipice on which she was standing as she quite readily made answer—

“‘No, Phil, I do not deny it. To do so would be to do a honourable man injustice. Since you have discovered the letter, it is a pity you are not able to read it.’

“No doubt she said these last words without a thought, but he found in them a mocking taunt at his want of scholarship, and his face grew darker.

“‘What!’ said he, still clutching her wrist with his left hand, ‘what if I tell you that, though I am a dull dolt, and cannot read, I know every line—every word that infernal letter contains? What if I tell you that I have found you out and know you now for what you are?’

“‘And what am I, my husband?’ she answered, steadily regarding him, but with all the colour gone from her cheeks.

"I could not hear the word he said, with his lips close to her ear, but as he gave utterance to it, with a sharp cry she snatched her hand from him and struck him across the face and walked rapidly away.

"I was on a flinty bank, and hidden by a clump of thick bushes at least a dozen yards above them. I saw him take out and unsheath the dagger-knife, and with a murderous grip of its handle instantly follow her. Half turning and perceiving the glistening blade, with a shriek she ran, and uttering a terrible imprecation that revealed his design, he ran too. I had but one impulse, and that was to save an innocent woman's life. The jagged flint stones lay thick about where I was standing, and catching up the largest I hurled it at him. It struck him full in the face, and he dropped as though dead without a cry."

The woman reputed to be deaf and dumb uttered a piteous moan, and seemed to grasp the blind man's hands tighter than before. Even Sibley Hext sat up on the floor with staring eyes and listened in wonder.

"I don't think that she had the least suspicion of what had happened," John Raymond presently continued. "Her fright was such that she ran screaming on deeper into the wood, until she was out of sight and sound. Then, filled with horror and dread, I went down into the hollow to see how much her husband was hurt. He was a sorry spectacle. I had not paused to consider the size and weight of the stone I hurled at him. It seemed to have crushed his face in and killed him. When I shook him and called him by name he gave no signs of life, and then the cowardly fear of being myself suspected and

having, perhaps, his murder to answer for possessed me, and I fled.

"I never went back to London even, but got to Liverpool, and thence to America, where I did well at my trade, and speculated and made money. But I could not resist the yearning to return to England and learn the worst. It was on the very next day after my arrival here that, passing through Bishopgate Street, I there came face-to-face with a blind beggar who, poor fellow, was the man I had dreamt of many and many a tormenting night as having been killed by my hand. What happened after that, as far as I am concerned, you already know. As God is my judge, I have stated only the truth, concealing nothing; and this before witnesses. I swear, it was I who deprived my poor friend here of his precious eyesight, and I will, as long as I live, and have the means of doing so, do my best to lighten his heavy affliction. I do not ask him to forgive me, for that I had already done before I set out to find that dog now lying by the door and bring him here."

With his voice broken with emotion, the blind man, who still held fast to the hand of his kind nurse, the deaf and dumb woman, made as though he had something to say, and seeing this she beckoned us to come nearer, and, responding, we were presently all gathered about the bed, except Sibley Hext, who, like the dog John Raymond had stigmatized him, sat crouched by the room door whining to be allowed to go.

"John, my friend," said Phil Rokeby, "no one

knows better than I know how truthfully you have told what you had to tell. As for forgiving you, it is I who should pray for forgiveness, and be thankful that I am so lightly let off. It is better to be blind than a murderer, and that I should have been but for you. But it is not the loss of my eyes that is now my great affliction. You have promised, John Raymond—before witnesses you have promised and sworn it—that you will do your best to lighten my trouble. There is one way before all others that you can do so, John, and as a man who may have not many days to live, I must put the task on you. Find my wife. Bring me some tidings of her, though it must be the most terrible tidings of all—that she is dead—and I will do my best to bear it as a man should. I swear to you,” and he lifted the hand that was disengaged as high above his head as it could be raised, “I swear to you, John Raymond, and to all here, that, were I hale and sound, and had eyes to see with, I would freely consent to be stricken blind—to be stricken dead—could I but hear her dear voice once again!”

Then came the climax.

The hand that was fellow to the one the blind man was still gratefully clasping was cast round his neck, and with a cry indescribable the “dumb” woman spoke.

With her tearful face pressing his cheek, she exclaimed, “Phil! dear Phil!”

Not much, but more than enough, judging from the alarming change that instantly came over Rokeby’s face. He went deadly white, and looked like a man

whose unsteady flame of life had been suddenly extinguished. Seeing this, the doctor stepped hastily forward and whispered to the woman.

But her act of hastily raising her head from his served to rouse him, and, holding her more closely to him, he exclaimed bewilderedly—

“What—what miracle is this? Am I awake or dreaming?”

“Phil, dear Phil,” she repeated, “it is I—your wife—she who has nursed and tended you ever since you came from the hospital. I have been with you all this time, and the little child that is here so often, and of which you are so fond, is our child. It has been cruelly hard to play the part I have, but I dared not speak before, for fear, not knowing the truth, you should drive us away from you.”

And then, with many sobs and tears, she related her part of the strange story.

How that when she fled from him that terrible time she hastened home at once, and, taking her child, went right away intending never to return, and that soon afterwards she heard—read in the newspapers, in fact—what had happened to him. How that he had been found blind and with his face terribly injured in the wood, and that it was supposed that he had fallen into one of the deep chalk holes that abound thereabouts, and so came by his hurts. Coming back to London, though avoiding her old home, she found the hospital he was taken to, and, waiting until he was discharged, forgiving his vengeful hatred for her, for their old love and the little child’s sake, she had pretended to be deaf and dumb,

and contrived to lodge in the same house with him and to become his friend and nurse.

There being nothing more to tell or to listen to, nothing remained to be done but to congratulate the devoted wife and the blind husband so strangely restored to each other and come away.

We were not the first to withdraw, however.

Taking advantage of our absorbed attention at the bed-side, Sibley Hext had contrived to shoot back the bolt of the lock with his clasp knife, and our first intimation of his having done so was his bounding down the stairs and slamming the outer door behind him.

John Raymond, who probably had something final to say to him, was not ten seconds behind him, but when we reached the street the malicious little villain who had caused all the trouble and mischief had vanished.

PROFESSOR SHRIMPZED.

TO outsiders, and those not personally interested, could the particulars have been known to them, they would no doubt have appeared highly diverting ; but it was a very very long way from being a joke to Miss Coogal's justly incensed nephew and niece.

The matter stood thus.

Miss Coogal, aged sixty-four last birthday, and with the considerable sum of nine thousand pounds safely invested in Three per Cents., had, for a long time, resided with her favourite nephew, Mr. John Pepper, managing clerk, at a salary of three hundred a year, at a hardware warehouse in Thames Street. It was only by the exercise of the strictest economy that, with their five children—four of them girls—the Peppers could keep up appearances, living, as they did, in the most respectable part of Kentish Town. They derived no immediate advantage from entertaining their Aunt Coogal. On the contrary, they were considerably the poorer for entertaining that jolly old lady. She had her own sitting-room, and monopolized the best bed-room. Although blessed with an excellent appetite, she was fastidious in her

eating and drinking, and was partial to nice little hot suppers, to the cost of which she never contributed as much as a shilling.

It was quite understood between her and her nephew that she was not expected to do so. She could not bear the idea of being treated as a lodger, and looked to to make a cash equivalent for the various domestic comforts she enjoyed. She would settle for all some day, she was in the habit of cheerfully remarking, and Pepper, like a dutiful nephew, never failed to remark, by way of reply, that his dear relative's congenial companionship more than compensated for the trifling difference she made to the home expenses, and he should be the unhappiest wretch alive if he thought that his aunt was troubled with the least suspicion that he was actuated by mercenary motives.

Whereas, the plain truth was, that Mr. John Pepper knew already that he figured in the old lady's will to the comfortable tune of three thousand pounds—no more. There were three married nephews, and though John was her acknowledged favourite, she was on friendly terms with all the ~~others~~, and as, without exception, they were all decent fellows, with wives and families, she could not leave them out in the cold, and it was understood that the remaining six thousand pounds of Aunt Coogal's money was to be equally divided among them. And this arrangement was accepted by them as quite satisfactory. Brotherly love continued to prevail among them, and, without bickering or heart-burnings, the other three were content to wait with praiseworthy resignation

for the melancholy event that would place them in more comfortable circumstances, and their aunt, being of full habit of body and a hearty feeder, was not likely to outlive their patience. But in the midst of this placid looking forward to a bright future, the clouds unexpectedly lowered, and their hopes seemed in imminent danger of being blighted.

The blighter took the shape of a chiropodist, of all shapes in the world! a rascally corn-cutter, calling himself Professor Shrimpzed, who had lately come into the neighbourhood. Although he made a great flourish as regards the reputation he had achieved, and spoke of the "crowned heads" on whose pedal excrescences his chiropodistic skill had been exercised, it was at present in such straitened circumstances that, as was rumoured, he was in the habit of carrying round his own circulars after dark and dropping them into the letter-boxes of private houses so as to save postage. Professor Shrimpzed was an individual of imposing appearance. He was still a young man; not more than thirty at all events, tall and shapely, with the loveliest complexion imaginable and glistening white teeth, and an elegantly trained and jet black moustache. Moreover, his blue eyes had so much of soft persuasion in them that they seemed almost capable of coaxing out by its roots the most obdurate corn that ever plagued a toe. But withal Professor Shrimpzed was as cunning a quack and humbug as ever imposed on human credulity. Even at the trade he pretended to, he was no better than a bungler, and, only for his good looks and his impudence, he would probably never have improved

on his original position, which was that of a street pill vendor in such market streets as the New Cut, at Lambeth, and Brick-lane, in Spitalfields. It was a rueful day for the Pepper family when the maid-of-all-work of the establishment carried up, with the breakfast tray, to Miss Coogal one of Professor Shrimpzed's circulars addressed to that lady, and which she, Eliza Ann, had found on the door-mat.

To be afflicted with corns, both hard ones and soft, were about the only bitter drops in Miss Coogal's cup of happiness. She had them on her toes and between them, on the excruciating "cup and ball" principle, and on the soles of her feet. She had tried every purchasable nostrum in the vain hope of obtaining relief, but as yet she had never called in a chiropodist. Probably she would not have done so now only that her tormentors had been teasing her with an extra twinge. Miss Coogal read the circular, and said she, "As soon as you have had breakfast, Eliza, you shall go to the corn extracting man and request him to call on me this morning."

Professor Shrimpzed was not so busy but that he was able to put in a prompt appearance at Mr. Pepper's abode. Eliza Ann, fascinated by his white teeth and his glossy moustache, had readily answered all the questions concerning her mistress's affliction the Professor had put to her; and she had gone back and communicated to Miss Coogal that he was the handsomest gentleman that she, Eliza, had ever clapped eyes on. "I don't care," returned Miss Coogal, "if he is as ugly as sin, so that he is able to give my poor feet a little ease." Nevertheless the

elderly maiden lady, who had never been remarkable for beauty, was pleurably impressed with the elegant and deferential bow with which the Professor introduced himself, as well as with his appearance generally. With an expression of tenderest sympathy in his eyes, he listened to the details of the patient's trouble, and then producing the shining little implements of his craft, Mrs. Pepper being present to assist in the necessary preliminary arrangements, he proceeded to operate.

"Now, when it is said that Miss Coogal had never been remarkable for her beauty, an allowance must be made for politeness of language and the delicacy due to her sex. Blunt folk, who persist in calling a spade a spade, might, perhaps, have insisted that poor old Miss Coogal was just about as plain as she well could be without being downright ugly. She had passed the greater part of her life in the West Indies, and how much her biliary system had suffered in consequence was indicated by her complexion. Her nose may be briefly described as being nothing much to speak of, and one of her eyes, which were small and deep-set, had a habit of acting independently of its fellow, and insisting on regarding things from its own particular point of view, which was usually an oblique one.

It would be incorrect to say that Miss Coogal had never been in love.

Her susceptible heart had more than once been well-nigh incinerated with the consuming heat of the tender passion; but, unhappily, it had never been reciprocated. Professor Shrimpzed was on his knees

at her feet, or rather at her left foot, which rested on an ottoman. He was thus professionally engaged, of course ; but never in her life had Miss Coogal beheld a male creature in such a posture so near her before, and the sensation was a novel one. Looking down on him, she was at liberty to view his luxuriant chestnut curls, his moustache, the baby-like pinky white of his cheeks. If she winced under the prod, though never so little, he looked up with tender solicitude, and said, "I am afraid, madam, I hurt you! I am so sorry!" in such a kind and soothing way, that when, having finished with one corn, he considerably suggested that that would be enough for the time (his visits cost only half-a-guinea each), and that he would look in again next morning, Miss Coogal at once intimated that she thought she had courage enough to have another corn—a little one, at all events—operated on without further delay. And shrewdly bethinking Miss Coogal remarked, "It shall make no difference as regards your fee, Professor Shrimpzed." To which he responded with tender melancholy, and with a glance at his fair patient, that Mrs. Pepper did not perceive—

"It is not that, madam ; I would rather attend you without payment at all, than to forego the pleasure of giving you relief."

The old lady mentioned afterwards to her nephew this last among other of the corn doctor's politenesses.

"A flattering humbug" said Mr. Pepper.

"Oh, I don't know," returned Aunt Coogal, tartly ;
"*all* men are not bears, John."

Miss Coogal had no less than nine corns, but, better than all, from Professor Shrimpzed's point of view, that is to say, the unfortunate lady was afflicted with a bunion as well. For nine days in succession his attendance at Myrtle Villa was punctual, and Miss Coogal could not sufficiently express her gratitude for the unspeakable relief his skill had afforded her. As early as the fourth or fifth day she had become so impressed with his superior manner, as well as his marvellous dexterity; that she questioned the gentle operator as to how he had attained such a pitch of cleverness. He, then, with many sighs and with tears in his blue eyes, briefly related to Aunt Coogal and her niece, who was present, the long story of his adventurous life. It will be needless to recapitulate it here; but it included the amazing statement that by birth he was a nobleman—Count Shrimpzed—and that political intrigue had caused his banishment from the ancestral estates which were situated in one of the remoter provinces of Germany. And that, preferring to gain a living by honourable industry than being dependent on friends who looked coldly down on him, he had studied the profession of the chiropodist as one by which, without ostentation, he would best ameliorate the sufferings of poor humanity. Her harvest of corns successfully cropped, Miss Coogal, without again referring to fees, delicately enclosed in an envelope a cheque for ten guineas, and handed it to the Professor, who conscientiously declared that he was overpaid, and insisted on undertaking to completely cure his patient's bunion without further reward. It

would be a tedious process, he said ; but though he might have to look in every day for a month probably, he need not trespass on the lady's time on each occasion more than a mere few minutes.

Then it was that the mischief begun. As the personal application of a magical ointment was all that was required to banish the obnoxious bunion Miss Coogal had merely to report to Professor Shrimpzed how the cure was progressing, and therefore it was not necessary for Mrs. Pepper to be in the room when the former made his customary call. But, to Mrs. P.'s alarm, it was soon noticeable that the "mere few minutes" rapidly extended, until the interesting Professor and his patient found something or other to talk about for a half to three-quarters of-an-hour. Even then something—in connection with the bunion, of course—had usually been forgotten, rendering it necessary for Miss Coogal to despatch Eliza to the corn-doctor's residence in the course of the afternoon or evening with a little note, and to await an answer, which likewise was epistolary. In less than a fortnight the Professor no longer made known his coming by a modest little "rat-tat-tat" at the knocker. He came with a bold and resounding salute that might have been heard half up the street, and, with his moustache glossier than ever and a flower in his button-hole. As soon as the street door was opened he marched up-stairs without ceremony, merely remarking gaily to the maid-of-all-work, "Don't trouble, Eliza, I know my way perfectly well."

"And between you and me, my dear," said Mr.

Pepper, to whom this was related by his wife, "I begin to believe that the confounded rascal never uttered truer words. He *does* know his way, and if we are not careful he will be marrying that foolish old woman up-stairs out of hand, and we may whistle for what we have so long and so justly been in expectation of."

That same afternoon Mr. Pepper's suspicions were undeniably verified. Eliza Ann, who was a good-looking girl, and who, to speak the truth, had no patience with the handsome corn doctor for making believe to be enamoured with old Miss Coogal, happened to discover, while making her bed, the last two little notes received by the latter from the Professor, and left by accident under the old lady's pillow. Mrs. Pepper, actuated by the purest motives, made no scruple in opening them, and was like to have fainted when she commenced to read the first one. "My ever darling Judy," it began (Miss Coogal's Christian name was Judith), and, after breathlessly skimming the gushing missive, she found that it was signed, "Yours, my beloved, until death, Count Shrimpzed."

That same evening Mr. Pepper and his three brothers—all legatees in prospective under Miss Coogal's will—were close closeted in council.

There is no reason why the fact should be concealed or that the reader should be kept in any doubt about it—Professor Shrimpzed was the accepted lover of Miss Coogal!

More than that, the artful and unscrupulous vagabond had contrived, by flattery and blarney, so to

ingratiate himself with the vain and venerable spinster that he felt confident that he had only to propose to her a runaway match, and she could be very speedily brought to agree to it.

The deuce of it was, the Professor had no money!

Chiropody was not appreciated in Kentish Town. During the whole three months he had been located there, Miss Coogal had been his only customer. And all the ready money he had had the handling of, during the whole of the period mentioned, was the proceeds of the ten-guinea cheque the lady had given him. He was in debt for rent at the house where he had apartments. The hat on his head and the shoes on his feet were not as yet paid for, and he owed two-and-threepence to the poor old flower-woman who stood at the corner for the charming button-holes that decorated his braided coat when he made his morning call at Myrtle Villa.

It was the only decent coat he possessed, and he could not afford to wear it—nor was it necessary that he should do so—when he betook himself of evenings to a far-off low public-house to enjoy a humble pint of porter and smoke a pipe in the tap-room, and to discuss revolutionary politics with the company there assembled. The Professor was a person with a grievance, and it relieved him to ventilate it. He frequently did so in private, with no other audience than his reflected self in the toilette glass.

“And that is a man,” he would murmur, when he had sufficiently admired teeth, moustache, blue eyes, and curly hair, “that is an individual who, at

the present moment, is actually hard-up for a penny to buy a cigarette with! With thousands of blunt-nosed, coarse-looking characters swaggering about with plenty of money in their pockets and probably more in the bank, that image of an Adonis—if ever there was one—has not been able, in consequence of having but one pair, to change his socks for a fortnight past!”

A prominent member of the little spouting club held in the tap-room of the “Flaming Beacon,” the Professor went in hot and strong for revolution, and frequently alluded darkly to Mother Shipton’s famous prophecy respecting the street gutters of London brimming over with human gore. It may be just hinted that the four brothers Pepper had discovered where and how Professor Shrimpzed spent his evenings.

One night, and for an unbroken succession of nights afterwards, for more than a week, a new customer, and one whose political opinions were equal almost, as regards heat and strength, to the Professor’s own, made his appearance in the tap-room of the “Flaming Beacon.” He was a small and insignificant-looking personage, and one would never imagine from his mild voice and manner, and his general aspect, that when roused he was such a lion; no half-measures for him, make a clean sweep of them, sir. Catch ’em altogether one night when they were assembled in the House of Lords, march ’em straight to the Tower, and make every man Jack of them a head shorter before morning. Then, and not till then, would crushed and oppressed Englishmen breathe the air of freedom! This gentleman (who,

when he was asked for it, grimly gave his name as "Charcoal") took kindly to Professor Shrimpzed on the very first night they met, and as Mr. Charcoal insisted on paying for everything that was called for to drink, the corn doctor did not hesitate to extend to him the hand of friendship, or to endorse his most sanguinary views.

"I tell you what, my friend!" Mr. Charcoal one night whispered to Professor Shrimpzed as, after having been turned out at midnight from the "Beacon," the two walked together up the street, "I am getting sick of this all talk and no do. I was led to expect that I should meet with a different set there."

"Led by whom?" the Professor asked.

But Mr. Charcoal placed three fingers on his closed lips, and winked mysteriously.

"I may tell you frankly," spoke Mr. Charcoal presently, "that you are the only promising blade that uses the tap-room, and I believe that you possess the courage of your opinions. But you will excuse me when I remark that I should like to feel quite assured of it before I let you into a secret as regards who and what I am."

"You may take my word for it," returned Professor Shrimpzed recklessly (he had partaken of four threes of Irish whiskey, hot, with lemon), "that I am out-and-out a revolutionist from the soles of my boots to the crown of my hat."

"Are you a member of any league?" Mr. Charcoal screened his mouth with his hand as he made the inquiry.

"I never had the chance of being made a member,"

the Professor responded, "but I should much like to. Of a league that meant business, you understand."

"Good!" returned the little man, "our league means business! Join us."

Professor Shrimpzed hesitated.

"Is there any entrance-fee to pay?" he then inquired, "because, if there is, I object, on principle."

"There is nothing at all to pay," returned the revolutionist; "on the contrary, when we are able to enlist good men and true, we are only too happy to pay them."

"Do your recruits get anything on enlisting?" the Professor asked smiling, for he was not sure but that the whole thing was a joke.

"They are immediately put in possession of a sum sufficient for current expenses; as, for instance, if as a superior officer of the P.C.S. I swore you in," continued Mr. Charcoal still in a whisper, and as the two stood together at a dark street corner. "If I swore you in, as I am authorized to do, and made you ours irrevocably, by conferring on you our mark, it would be my duty to hand at once to you the sum of twenty pounds."

"And what might P.C.S. stand for?" Professor Shrimpzed asked, with increasing interest.

"First," responded Mr. Charcoal, "will you join us?"

The Professor, who had grown suddenly sober, hesitated.

"It is a serious matter," said he; "give me until we reach the next lamp-post to decide."

Mr. Charcoal gave him an assenting squeeze of the hand, and they walked on slowly. But Professor Shrimpzed's cogitations were not exclusively political.

"Now what the deuce does all this mean?" he thought to himself. "If it really means twenty pounds for me, no matter how I come at it, there could not be a more opportune slice of luck. With twenty pounds in hand, I could whip off with my blushing young maiden of Myrtle Villa, and make her my wife before the end of the week. As for this crack-brained little joker, there'll be no danger in swindling him, if he really is what he says he is. I don't pretend to be very valiant, but I wouldn't mind pitching into *him* if I got hold of his money, and he was any annoyance to me afterwards. I'll see a little further into it anyhow."

They had by this time arrived at the lamp-post.

"Well," said Mr. Charcoal.

"I'll join you," responded Professor Shrimpzed. "Now what do P.C.S. stand for?"

"Bend your head," replied the other. "P.C.S. stands for 'Pledged Cinder Sifter.'"

"He is mad as a March hare," thought Professor Shrimpzed with disgust; "the twenty pounds will turn out to be mere moonshine after all." But aloud he remarked—

"Where are the cinders?"

"Nowhere at present," returned little Mr. Charcoal impassively. "The cinders we are pledged to sift are those of London, after the members of our League have committed the entire city to the flames! He will be a rich man, I take it, who is in at the

sifting—especially in the neighbourhood of Thread-needle-street! But we are wasting time; are you quite resolved?”

“I am,” replied Professor Shrimpzed; “but nothing can be done to-night?”

“Much can,” returned the other. “You can be initiated and enlisted to-night, if you will come with me to my lodgings.”

“But what about the—the trifle of money you spoke of?” the Professor hinted.

“That is in readiness,” was the reply. “The moment you are made one of us, the twenty pounds will be entrusted to your keeping. Do you agree to accompany me?”

“But, surely, you are not able to initiate me single-handed?”

“That would be against the laws of our league,” replied Mr. Charcoal. “There must be three of us present. I will summon the other two.”

And so saying, he produced a small whistle and blew on it, and within a few seconds the sounds were repeated at some distance off, first to the right and then to the left.

“Good,” said Mr. Charcoal, pocketing his whistle. “They understand. They will proceed to my quarters, and get things in readiness. We will take a short walk while they do so, and then we will join them.”

Professor Shrimpzed spoke the truth when he said that he was not very valiant.

For a man of his inches it would perhaps have been difficult to find a greater coward at heart than he was, and this last-recorded proceeding on the part

of his companion occasioned him some amount of dismay.

He had not prepared himself to go to this length.

To bamboozle little Mr. Charcoal, whom he hoped was merely a revolutionary lunatic with money, was one thing. To face a clique of sworn conspirators was another. But, after all, if he could but touch that twenty pounds, what did it matter? He was a made man with that amount to handle, and nowhere at all without it. When he had married Miss Coogal and her fortune he would pay back the money and cancel the agreement, and make them a present of a ten-pound note in the bargain, if it came to that.

They walked for a quarter of an hour or so, and then Mr. Charcoal led the way to his lodgings, which were in a back street in Pentonville. Letting himself in with a latch-key, he proceeded up-stairs—Professor Shrimpzed screwing up his courage as he followed closely behind—and knocked at a door on the second floor, which was promptly opened. In the room were two men, wearing cloaks and masks, so that their features were invisible. On a table, with a lamp, there was a book, with three daggers, their blades crossed, resting on it, and a small cup containing what—the Professor shuddered as he thought—was much like blood. But what chiefly attracted his attention was two little piles of bright sovereigns consisting of ten each!

He fixed his eyes on them, and was nerved for the worst. Captain Charcoal locked the door. The masked men spoke not a word, and what the Captain

communicated to them was by means of the dumb alphabet, spelt on the fingers ; and so they replied.

"Our ceremony," remarked Captain Charcoal, turning to the Professor, "is brief, and though it is witnessed by only these two, bear in mind, there are fifty such men to-morrow morning who will be made aware of your initiation, and who are sworn to execute summary vengeance on you, in all places, and at all times, and without a moment's notice, should you prove in the least degree unfaithful to the oath you are about to take. You are prepared for that?"

"Quite prepared," replied the Professor, with a steady eye on the money.

He was then sworn. The oath he took was a terrible one. As a member of the P.C.S. he vowed to yield unquestioned obedience to his superior officers, and to undertake single-handed or to take part in any act of incendiarism that, when the time came, might be allotted to him. Likewise he vowed to stick at no mentionable crime, assassination included, that might promote the aims of the P.C.S. League, and to this end one of the three daggers on the table, with a suitable sheath, was presented to him. Nor was this all. To make the ceremony of initiation complete, it was necessary that the initials of the league, "P.C.S.," should be indelibly marked on the fleshy part of his right arm, between the wrist and the elbow, and this was accomplished with the red liquid in the cup and a needle and a small brush. It was only by keeping a steadfast gaze on the two piles of gold that Professor Shrimpzed kept himself from fainting during the last painful operation, and it

was an unspeakable relief to him when Captain Charcoal handed him the twenty sovereigns, and informed him that he was now at liberty to depart. His parting words were—

“When we wish to communicate with you it will not be through the post. That would be too dangerous. An emissary of the League will meet you in the street. You will know him by his holding up his thumb, crooked at the first joint. It will be your duty to follow him without a moment’s delay.” The Professor nodded acquiescence, and was let out at the street door.

“Be hanged to the whole murdering lot of you!” he muttered with a grin, and slapping the pocket which contained the twenty pounds. “I am all right now, or I shall be before I am a week older. And I should like to see them interfere with a man who has nine thousand pounds of his own and his wits about him! Besides, if the worst happened, what is to prevent me going abroad and defying them?”

Professor Shrimpzed resolved to lose no time. He purchased a pair of lavender kid gloves, and paid ready money for a camellia for his button-hole, and next morning waited on Miss Coogal, and going on his knees unprofessionally, he then vowed his consuming passion for the weak-minded old lady, and implored her to fly with him. He had not wealth to offer her; he said, indeed, he had only a few hundred pounds he could at present call his own, but the coffers of a king were not richer in gold than was his heart with love for her. And the time must shortly come when he would be able to boldly claim his rights in his

own country, and where, as the Countess Shrimpzed, she would be loved and honoured as well by the neighbouring nobility as by his late father's faithful tenantry. Miss Coogal shed tears, as did the Professor, as was vouched for by Mrs. Pepper and by Eliza Ann, who all the time were listening outside the door. And the end of it was that Miss Coogal promised what was asked of her. One chaste kiss sealed the contract, and the overjoyed Professor undertook to set about the necessary preparations without an hour's delay.

He was fully alive to the necessity for making Miss Coogal his own as soon as possible, and to getting her to accompany him to some Continental part as soon as he could afterwards. He did not feel comfortable respecting those confounded P.C.S.'s. He had hoped to be able, if he set about the job at once, to eradicate that tell-tale brand from his arm, but though he tortured himself for an hour trying to do so, he found it impossible. Moreover, he very strongly suspected that, as he left Myrtle Villa that morning, he saw an individual strongly resembling in stature one of the wicked ruffians he had dealings with the night before, watching him from the opposite side of the way.

He went down to Thames-street that same evening to ascertain when the Hamburg steamboat started, and while he was proceeding along a narrow way that led down to the wharf he met with an individual with a slouch hat worn low over his eyes, and who first looked hard at him, and then elevated and wagged his left thumb, crooked at the first joint!

It gave him a sickening shock, and he turned to

pass on, taking no notice. But the man quickened his pace, and, walking for a few moments by his side, whispered, "Beware the league's vengeance!" And then, turning down a by-street, disappeared.

He was so upset by the encounter that he had to enter a public-house and get some brandy. It was late when he reached his abode, and, still in a state of what is vulgarly termed "funk," was about to open the street door with his latch-key, when a cloaked personage suddenly thrust into his hand a paper, and vanished. When his trembling knees had borne him up-stairs to his own room he opened the paper and read—

"You have been reported; fail not at your peril to appear at head-quarters to-morrow night at twelve o'clock to make satisfactory explanation.—PRESIDENT P.C.S."

Professor Shrimpzed wiped his perspiring brow. "The bloodthirsty villains thought I was going to bolt abroad with their twenty pounds," said he. "I am in a horrible dilemma! I never dreamt that they were such a ferocious crew. I shall be stuck like a sheep instead of marrying a fortune if I don't keep a bright look-out. I'll have the old wench away from Myrtle Villa in the morning, and stow her in some quiet place down in the country for a few days until I can get tied to her." And he was confirmed in his determination before he got into bed. Raising a corner of the window-blind to look out, he saw two men—both wearing cloaks and slouch hats—surveying the house from the opposite pavement and whispering together.

But a reception very different from that he anticipated awaited him when, next morning, he called at Mr. Pepper's residence. It was not Eliza Ann, but Mr. Pepper himself, who opened the door, looking flushed and angry.

"Just step into the parlour here, sir," said he sternly, "I have a few words to say to you."

With guilty pallor, seriously interfering with his peach-bloom complexion, Professor Shrimpzed reluctantly obeyed.

"Words would be wasted between us, sir," the master of the house remarked; "have the goodness to read that letter, and to give us your opinion of it." With a shaking hand, the Professor took the missive alluded to from its envelope, and read as follows:—"This from a friend.—The scoundrel calling himself Professor Shrimpzed, and who, I believe, is carrying on a clandestine correspondence with an aged relative of yours, is a sworn member of one of the most ruffianly revolutionary leagues in this country. For proof, see the brand of the abominable brotherhood on the fleshy part of his right arm." The Professor's pearly teeth chattered together as he with difficulty ejaculated—

"You, surely sir, would not—would not—condemn an innocent man on the testimony of a cowardly communication which does not even bear a signature?"

"Certainly not," promptly replied Mr. Pepper; "up with your sleeve, man, and prove the writer a liar!"

Professor Shrimpzed looked round him in helpless

dismay. There was a dog-whip on the table, and now, for the first time, he noticed that Mr. Pepper, who was a muscular man, had his cuffs turned back.

"I—I decline, sir," he gasped, "to submit to such an indignity. The word of a gentleman, sir——"

"Of a what?" thundered Mr. Pepper.

But Professor Shrimpzed was quicker in grasping his hat than the other the dog-whip, and, fleeing from the house, was seen no more.

Miss Coogal may have mourned in secret, but she never breathed a word respecting how near she was to being made Countess Shrimpzed. Nor, as far as has been ascertained, have any public buildings been set blazing by the "P.C.S.," otherwise Pepper Brothers.

JUST IN PUDDING TIME.

UNDOUBTEDLY it was exasperating, but whether sufficiently so as to justify young Bill's unfilial outburst is another matter. Bill was not of the crying sort; in fact, he was past the age of blubbering boyhood, and was a sturdy chap of fourteen or thereabouts, and had elbowed his way in the world in pursuit of a living too long to be easily moved. But that which had now happened had come with such force and suddenness that the flood-gates of his tears had been fairly taken by storm, and bitter drops fell fast from his eyes as, in a fury, he clenched his soft old cap in his fist.

"Oh, don't take on so, Bill dear," imploringly exclaimed his sister Midget (Madge was her name, but she was called Midget, or Midge, because she was such a little thing), "it can't be helped now it is done. And, after all, it is a lucky, lucky thing that the children don't know nothing about the surprise we thought we had in store for them. They don't in the least look forward to to-morrow being Christmas, only by the name of it, and they don't expect any beef or pudding or anything. So they won't be disappointed ;

and that, Bill, if you come to think of it, is the next best thing to their being pleased. Besides, Bill dear, he is our father after all, now, hain't he?"

It was this last dutiful reminder of his patient little sister that did it.

Up to this point Bill Brewster had been only bubbling with grief; now he boiled over.

"Hain't he our father?" he repeated savagely; "'course he is. That is the wust of it. I wish he wasn't, Midge. Ah! it's no good you clasping your hands, I've said it, and I do wish it. I wish he wasn't our father. Not for good, mind yer—only for about a quarter of an hour, so as I might look on him in the light of a stranger and treat him as such. D'ye know what I'd do? I'd go up to him this instant minute and I'd say to him, 'Now come on, you jolly old thief!' And I'd half knock his precious head off. There!" And with flashing eyes Master Brewster dashed his cap down to the floor and stood with his arms folded ferociously.

But he did not long maintain that terrible attitude.

Hearing the dreadful avowal, his little sister, sitting on her stool by the fender, covered her face with her apron, and sobbed so pitifully that the sternness of Bill's wrath straightway relaxed, and in a twinkling he had her head, enveloped as it was in the apron, hugged close to his rough old jacket.

"I didn't say that, being my father, I'd do it to him, did I? I said I would if he was a stranger. 'Tain't likely I'd do it other ways. But it *is* hard lines, Midge, you must own that!"

She could do no other. Take the facts as they

stood. Who and what was Brewster, the elder, whom his son William had stigmatized as a "jolly old thief," and whose head, provided he could for the nonce have personated a perfect stranger, he, Bill, would have derived such satisfaction in knocking half off? He does not appear an eligible subject for a pugilistic encounter as we now behold him, prostrate, face downward, on his truckle-bed, with his muddy boots still on his feet, and his battered old tall hat still clinging to his head. Shabby as shabby can be is old Brewster, not only as regards his clothes, but through and through, and out and out, if ever a man was. He is crying and bemoaning himself as an unfortunate wretch, and one who is most justly despised by his children. However wicked a man may have been he is not to be derided when he manifests a contrite spirit such as the above-mentioned mournful ejaculations might seem to indicate. But it has yet to be told that he gave utterance to his own denunciations with difficulty owing to being afflicted with hiccups, begot of tipsiness. And when it is further made known that the idle and good-for-nothing tailor had not been getting drunk on his own earnings, but on the hoarded savings of his children, plundered from their money-box, the reader will not have much sympathy with him in his sorrow.

He, of all men, to be guilty of an act so mean and paltry! A dissipated, lazy fellow, who, even in his wife's life-time (she had been dead happily these three years past, poor soul!) had never contributed towards house-keeping expenses more than enough to pay the rent, let alone buy food and clothes for

his wife and children. It was a mistake on her part to marry such a man, not but that when single he was a smart-looking fellow enough, having a business of his own and was tolerably industrious. But, as it afterwards came out, he did not marry for love. He and Sarah Clutterbuck (the late Mrs. B.'s maiden name) were on nodding acquaintance merely when it came to his knowledge that Sarah's aunt, who years before had gone out to China to marry an opium broker, had lost her husband, and was shortly coming back to England, there to end her days. He, young Brewster, that is, had further ascertained on good authority that as a child Sarah had always been her aunt's pet and favourite, and that she was her goddaughter, and further still that in her most recent letters her relative had spoken of "making a lady" of darling little Patty.

Learning all this, young Brewster's love for the young woman increased with such alarming rapidity that it was partly out of pity lest if it were allowed to remain unallayed for any length of time it might consume him altogether, that her friends consented to the marriage. But within a month of that happy event there came another and a last letter from China from Aunt Clutterbuck, intimating that she wasn't, after all, coming back to England, having at the last moment—after her luggage was packed and her passage taken, in fact—been prevailed on by her late husband's partner to marry again and remain at Shanghai.

From that time Brewster became quite an altered man; his liveliness and his capacity for business forsook

him, and he grew discontented and despondent, and in twelve months he had lost his shop and was working as a journeyman. But he grew more and more idle, spending all that he earned—which was not very much—at the public-house, and depending on his wife, who was clever as a lace-mender, to provide for their growing family. He did not require much himself, simply his breakfast before he went out in the morning, and something for his supper when he came staggering home late at night. When at length his harassed and quite worn-out wife died, there seemed nothing for it but for the family to move into the workhouse. Indeed, overwhelmed with grief when the full weight of his bereavement fell upon him, and probably foreseeing what a dismal look-out it was for him as regards his future breakfasts and suppers, the disconsolate tailor himself was the first to suggest an application boldly to the board of guardians.

But his daughter, Midget, rebelled against such a step being taken. Though, as already mentioned, but a little thing—her age was then thirteen—she inherited not only her mother's independent spirit, but her industry and perseverance as well. Moreover, ever since she was ten years old she had played the part of housekeeper for her father and her four younger brothers and sisters, while mother was out at work (young Bill was in the retail firewood business, and in receipt of three shillings a week, going about with the cart with his master), and she at once announced her intention to do her best to keep the home together. At the time of which I am

writing she had picked up some knowledge of the brushmaking from a lodger who lived in the house and who worked at home, and now that Polly, the next younger girl, was able to make herself useful, she, Midget, could very well (it didn't matter to Midget how late at night she worked) make seven or eight shillings a week, and thus, with Bill's earnings, which now amounted to almost as much more, she could, by pinching and contriving, support her little brothers and sisters and pay her way. As for father, his hands were so shaky that, according to his own account, his earnings were not worth mentioning.

But bad times had of late befallen the brother and sister. The firewood seller had failed, and for as long as five weeks Bill had been entirely out of work, and all that could be depended on to keep the house was the small sums the willing boy could pick up by doing odd jobs and going on errands and what Midget, his sister, could earn at the brushmaking. This was especially unfortunate just now, because, months ago, as long back, indeed, as the beginning of October, they, Midget and Bill that is to say, had concocted between them a wonderful surprise for the forthcoming Christmas Day. It should be mentioned, to the credit of the deceased wife of the disreputable tailor, that in the memory of her eldest child, which was Midget, she had never failed, somehow or other, to provide for the family a "real dinner" on the day of days. For many weeks prior to the great event she would, by going without the one half-pint of beer she usually allowed herself daily, and perhaps by abstaining from a meal

or two while she was from home, contrive to put by between the Saturdays as much, maybe, as ninepence, and this sum was secretly devoted to maintaining the weekly contributions at the grocer's and the butcher's, ensuring her materials for a plum-pudding, with groceries besides, and a handsome piece of beef—some seven or eight pounds, perhaps—for the Christmas dinner. But the grand feature of the whole affair was that for a long time before it was a theme for anxious private speculation amongst the youngsters (the tipsy tailor, her husband, pretended to be anxious too, but *he* knew), as to whether this year, as last, they were to keep Christmas. It was no use endeavouring to artfully inveigle mother into making indicative admissions. She would not go as far as to tell a downright fib about it, but should the subject be approached, no matter how warily, she would immediately affect to fire up in a way that speedily silenced the inquisitors. Where could be their consciences to think such a thing possible? Last year! Ay, last year and this were totally different. Last year she didn't have any one ill, with eighteenpence a week to pay to the dispensary doctor for a whole month. And, last year, she didn't have to pay a drunk and disorderly fine of five shillings for your father, with half-a-crown costs, for tearing the policeman's coat. She had had these expenses and others as well to meet this year, and how in the name of goodness could they think it possible that she could anyhow squeeze out club-money as well from her poor earnings?

It did seem preposterous to entertain such an

unlikely idea, but knowing her as they did, poor soul, they had perfect faith in her as a worker of miracles, and still clung to hope, and though they, the elder ones, Midget and Bill at all events, made a stout show of being equally amazed and delighted when on Christmas Eve, with her pale face flushed with triumph, mother came home with her basket crammed full of good things, and presently afterwards the butcher announced himself with a resounding knock at the door, and a declaration of his avocation in two distinctly pronounced syllables, they had been not without a presentiment of what would happen, and would have been disappointed, indeed, if mother had failed them. They never thought of father doing anything towards it. Regularly as clockwork there had to be a weekly row with him and a threatening of impending brokers to screw the four shillings for rent out of him, and having most reluctantly discharged that enormous liability, it was useless applying to him for another penny. But he, too (having previously discovered the two "club" cards hidden away in the old china tea-pot), would pretend astonishment when the materials for the morrow's feast made an appearance, and he would be so overcome with emotion at the goodness of Providence in giving him such a wife, that it was accounted cheap to get rid of him for the evening at a cost of sixpence, which (though he swore he was penniless) with the couple of shillings he already had in his pocket, enabled him to booze with the best of them until the public-house closed at twelve o'clock.

Since the demise of the tailor's wife, however, a

regular Christmas dinner had been unknown in the Brewster family. Midget had not been unmindful of it. Indeed, each year since the melancholy event she had resolved to do as mother did, but her means were so exceedingly limited that she had never been able to save more than one-and-ninepence, and then there had been an inexorable demand for that sum, or thereabout, and the good intent had to be abandoned. This year, however, she had taken Bill into her confidence, and they had entered solemnly into a secret compact that they would save every possible penny with a view to next Christmas. They bought a strong money-box and screwed it down, as securely as though it were meant to contain title-deeds, to the back part of a cupboard-shelf, and as long as Bill remained in work he was staunch to his promise, and Midget, of course, remained the same, and as there was nothing but lumber kept in the said cupboard, no one but the two dreamt of the accumulating hoard. So in their innocence they thought. But their father had got wind of it.

He slept in a little room immediately beneath that in which the cupboard was, and night after night he had heard a mysterious clinking of money overhead, and without asking questions about it, he busied himself in investigating the matter, and discovered the precious money-box.

But it was a firm fixture, and he could not, without resorting to violent measures, move it. But he was not to be beaten. He procured a sharp chisel, and ingeniously made a small slit through the under part of the shelf the money-box rested on, and through

the bottom of the money-box itself, and so was enabled to "tap" the little bank. His intent, however, was not to appropriate the whole of its contents at one fell swoop. His will might be good, but he lacked courage for such an act of daring as that. He did not contemplate downright robbery at all, at least he endeavoured to make himself believe that he did not. He knew well enough whose savings they were, and probably he could have given a shrewd guess as to how they were to be eventually spent. If so, he may probably have lulled his accusing conscience by arguing that it was only borrowing. There was plenty of time between this and Christmas to put back any trifling sums he might abstract from the box, and nobody need know anything about it.

So he took a shilling, that was all on the first occasion. But before the end of the week, finding himself one morning without a halfpenny, and yearning for a "hair of the dog that bit him" over-night, he filched another sixpence. And so, from time to time, the stealthy abstractions continued. He would sometimes come sneaking up after midnight and effect the paltry robbery by the light of a lucifer match, and with nothing but his night gear on, until he had taken every farthing. Even then he could not let the box alone. Working so late at her brushwork, Midget was invariably the last abed, and if she had anything, though no more than a penny, to put into her bank—she had no help in this direction from Bill since he had been out of regular employment—it was done the last thing, and her parent in the little back room beneath lay a-listening, and

if he heard a chink, he would then turn over with a sigh of relief and go to sleep comfortably, knowing that he was right for at least a penn'orth of gin next morning.

And so it came about that at Christmas Eve a terrible disappointment fell on the confiding depositors. What made it worse, having, of course, not the remotest suspicion but that their savings were intact, and being able to calculate pretty nearly what they amounted to, before Bill proceeded to operate with the screw-driver, he and Midge sat down together with a bit of paper and a pencil, to arrange how the money—about fifteen shillings, as they reckoned—might be most economically expended. There were so many things required that it was an anxious calculation. They wanted a nice piece of beef, with suet for the pudding, and potatoes, and cabbage, and plums, and currants, and flour, and spice, and—this last was Midget's own express stipulation from the first—a whole hundred-weight of coal, so that they might keep up without stint a blazing fire from morning till night. They did not forget poor father, either. It had not passed unnoticed with them that during the past few days he had appeared uncommonly downcast and dejected (and no wonder, the unprincipled old pilferer!), and it was resolved to set aside a whole shilling for him—for spirits and tobacco—in the hope that he might be induced, just for once, to stay at home for at least part of the Christmas evening, and they would be all happy and comfortable together. All was arranged and provided for, and then, the children being abed, Bill, softly whist-

ling, and Midget lighting him with a candle, they proceeded to the old cupboard.

With what result the reader has already been made aware. The brother and sister had but a minute before made the astounding discovery, and were still gazing at each other in mute despair, when the guilty tailor, rather more than half-intoxicated, and not knowing they were there, chanced to look in at the door.

“Oh, father, father!” exclaimed Midge wofully, but never dreaming that he was the robber. But the wretched man betrayed himself. Mistaking her woful ejaculation for the first notes of accusing, he broke down there and then, and begged and prayed them to forgive him in consideration of his failing health and strength, and the good father he had always been to them. He implored them not to speak harshly to him, as he was already in that state of mind that one unkind word from either of them would drive him to distraction, and he should at once put an end to his miserable existence, and then, in tears, he slunk down-stairs to his own room, and flung himself on the bed as we have already seen.

As may be well imagined it was but a shameful figure he cut next morning when he came shambling down to the kitchen to breakfast. Bill was not there. His rage and mortification having expended itself, like the sensible and industrious young fellow he was, he had come to the conclusion that what was done could not be undone, and that there was nothing for it but to make the best of a bad job. To this end, therefore, he had at early dawn hastily swallowed

a cup of coffee, and gone off to the railway station in hope of picking up a shilling carrying the luggage of Christmas passengers by train.

Midget said nothing to her father respecting his bad behaviour, but he could see by her pale face and her swollen eyes that she had been lying awake crying all night. The children were at the table, and they, not knowing anything of what had happened, and seeing no particular hardship in the prospect of nothing better than bread and dripping for dinner, hailed him with a cheerful shout of "A merry Christmas to you, father!" and the two youngest ran to kiss him. It was many a year since he felt so remorseful as at that moment. But he managed, somehow, to kiss them. But when poor Midget came forward, and with her sorrowful eyes, and lips trembling, offered herself for a similar salute, the conscience-stricken tailor found himself fairly knocked over, as the saying is, and, taking up his old hat he had brought with him out of his bed-room, he hastily put it on, and incoherently muttering something about "taking a little walk before he had breakfast," fled from the house.

It being Christmas morning, the public-houses were all closed, so that, although he had a few halfpence in his pocket, he was unable to buy himself a drop of anything to cheer his spirits, and not being able to muster courage to return home again, he continued miserably sauntering about the streets for a couple of hours or more, when something happened that completely banished his apathy. The people were astir by this time, and it being eleven o'clock,

a good many might be seen in the poorer streets carrying their Christmas dinner to the bake-house. Mr. Brewster was rendered more melancholy by this. It reminded him of what was and what might have been in his own case, when a woman, who was walking just before him, dropped something, and as it fell on to the soft ground she did not hear it fall, but passed on.

Brewster picked it up. It was a baker's "ticket"—a disc of tin with a number on it, and serving as a "delivery note" for a dinner that had been deposited for baking. He could have no doubt as to the establishment from which the ticket had been issued, for he had seen the woman come out of the baker's shop.

It might have been well supposed, in his subdued and penitent condition of mind, that, without hesitation, he would have restored the tin ticket to its owner. He knew enough about such matters to be aware that without that insignificant-looking metallic credential the woman would be unable to reclaim what she had left to be baked; but the first daring thought that entered his head was—would it be possible to make fraudulent use of the ticket and obtain the dinner, whatever it might be, for his own family? The sudden inspiration was as bewildering as it was desperate. It was not the dishonesty of the feat that daunted him. He was contrite as regards that little affair of the children's money-box only because his iniquity had been brought to light. Had any one else been suspected of the theft he probably would have been moved by no other emotion

than that of thankfulness that it was no worse. If he had been enabled to replace the money, as at the time he had vague ideas of doing, he would, no doubt, have plumed himself as having honestly kept his word. A man whose ideas of probity were so at sixes and sevens could hardly be expected to be troubled with many scruples under any circumstances.

His first sensation on picking up the ticket was that it was an unlooked-for windfall—a slice of luck. The only thing was how to make the most of it. It was a serious risk to run. He had wandered far enough from the street where he resided to be a stranger to the locality in which the baker's shop was situated; that was in his favour. But still the odds against his successfully "pulling off" the little transaction he had in his mind was still tremendously heavy. The woman might miss her ticket before the time came for her to make use of it. In that case she would probably hurry at once to the baker and give him notice of her loss, or, at all events, she would take care to be at the bakery door in good time so as to claim her property, should she discover any other person walking off with it. The chances favouring his success were that the woman would not miss her ticket, and that he (Mr. Brewster) would be able to secure the baking and get clear away with it before the proper owner arrived.

Should he risk it?

At all events he might go at dinner-fetching time and mingle with the crowd in waiting, and if the owner of the lost ticket turned up, then he could relieve her anxiety, and perhaps she might give him some-

thing for his honesty and the trouble he had taken to find her. It would be a glorious thing, indeed, if it could be managed. Poor Midget's woful little face haunted him, and he was fortified in his felonious resolve by reflecting that if there was any danger in the undertaking, for her sake—for the sake of his other dinnerless children—he ought not to shrink from it. It would be good fun, too, and a complete turning of the tables. "Ha! ha! you thought to astonish your old father, but he stole a march on you, you see. You thought he had been making free with your savings, eh? He knew well enough what you were hoarding the money for, and so, by way of a good joke, he abstracted the money from the box, and got a friend of his to buy the things for a Christmas dinner, and to take it to the bakehouse, so that the joyful surprise might be more perfect and complete, when it was brought in all smoking hot, at the very moment when you all were most wishing you had something better to eat than bread and dripping."

"I'll chance it," said the tailor.

And he did, and, what is more, he was successful. He was at the bakehouse as soon as the door was opened at one o'clock, and carefully listening among the people already in waiting, could hear nothing of a lost ticket. Then he marched boldly in to where the scores of dinners first drawn from the oven were set out for delivery on a great bench. And presently the baker-man called out "77!" "Here!" exclaimed Mr. Brewster, bold as brass, and, rendering up the ticket, in a twinkling he was out of the place and

bearing away his prize. His speculations as to its probable worth were more than realized. It might have been a mere three or four pounds of beef or mutton over a few potatoes. It turned out to be as handsome a leg of pork as ever was cut from pig, in a large divided baking-dish with plum batter pudding on one side and baked potatoes on the other!

The mere weight of it, to say nothing of the guilty speed with which he travelled, caused his face to be glowing red and bedewed with perspiration by the time he reached home, and that evidence, with an affectation of jollity, went far towards corroborating the marvellous story he had to tell, when, bursting into the kitchen he discovered Midget just in the act of slicing up the quartern-loaf, which was all there was for dinner. With a cheery laugh he set his smoking load down on the table, and while Midget, dumb in amazement, looked from the pork to her parent, and the other children gazed breathless, he reeled off to them the little fiction he had been rehearsing, and of which the reader has already been apprised. "Now you can come and kiss me, Midget!" he exclaimed, opening his arms. "Ha, ha! You won't be ashamed now, to kiss your wicked old father, who took your money away!"

To be sure, it was a wonderful surprise; and never was girl more perplexed and bewildered than poor Midget. If a thousand credible witnesses had sworn that her father could have done such a thing, she would have flatly refused to believe them. But what could she say in presence of such substantial facts as the pork and the potatoes and the batter

pudding with plums in it? She would like to have asked her father a few questions, but that wily dodger gave her but small chance of doing so. He was all bustle and activity, laying the cloth, and setting the plates to get hot in the fire-place, and sharpening the old carving-knife that had not been legitimately exercised for many a long day. As for the children, a mad doctor might, from their behaviour, without hesitation have certified them fit subjects for Colney Hatch. They shrieked with delight, they hoorayed, they gave each other pick-a-backs all round the room. The youngest but one, spying a personal acquaintance down in the street, threw up the window, and was bawling down to him the particulars of what they were about to have for dinner, when their father banged down the casement with a hasty jerk. Conscious of his frightened face, as he did so, he proceeded to justify it by sternly rebuking his youngest but one for letting in the cold air and spoiling the hot dinner. He was slightly upset again shortly afterwards when the still bewildered but grateful Midget, after they all were seated, proceeded to devoutly ask a blessing on the unexpected meal. He interrupted her by abruptly inquiring where was Bill?

"He hasn't come in yet, father. He promised to be home before two. We'll cut him off some, and keep it hot in the fender," said Midget.

"All right, then," remarked the tailor, flourishing his knife and fork. "Then we will cut away and pitch into it without any more words."

But "there's many a slip," &c.

He was in the very act of plunging his fork into the meat when there were heard voices in conversation—one unmistakably a woman's voice—and hasty footsteps ascending the stairs.

To see the tailor drop the carving implements and to note the guilty pallor that instantly overspread his before flushed face were surely enough to account for Midget's cry of terror.

With a scared glance around the room his eyes fixed on a large empty hamper that stood in a corner, and to the speechless horror of the children at the table, he caught up the baking-dish with all that was in it and hastily consigned it to the basket and shut the lid. Then the room door opened and Bill appeared. There was a wild and amazed look in his eyes, that considerably increased when he audibly scented pork with sage and onion stuffing that was invisible, and saw the table ready spread for a feast. But he had no time to ask questions.

"Come in, ma'am!" he exclaimed, beckoning to some one coming up-stairs.

Mr. Brewster sank into his chair with a groan. But the person who appeared was not the woman he had seen drop the ticket.

It was a little shrivelled old female, smartly dressed, with a bent back and a crutch stick, and a face all crumpled with wrinkles and as yellow as a guinea. But withal it was a kind face, and there were tears in her eyes as she gazed round the poorly-furnished room, and singling out Midget from the others came towards her with open arms, exclaiming, "God bless

you, my dear! You are the image of your poor mother, dead and gone!"

It was Aunt Clutterbuck from Shanghai.

Her second husband having died, she had made up her mind that now she really would return to England and end her days among her kindred; and being an eccentric person, she had delayed seeking her goddaughter Sarah, whom by this time she knew had married unluckily and was poor. But she had not heard that the tailor's wife was dead these three years past. Aunt Clutterbuck had been in London more than a week, but it was her whim not to make her visit to Chicksand Street until Christmas morning.

She had come by rail to Bishopsgate Station for that purpose, where Bill Brewster was in attendance for any job of parcel-carrying that might turn up, and Providence, who has an especial eye at Christmas time for such matters, so ordained it that in looking about for somebody to carry a parcel she had with her, whom should she spy but Bill, who was even more like his mother than Midget was. So much like her, indeed, that the old lady asked him his name, and so it all came about; and that accounted for Aunt Clutterbuck being aware that her goddaughter was dead before she arrived at the tailor's abode in Chicksand Street. It accounted for more than that—I mean Bill Brewster's talk with his great-aunt did. For she scarcely had time to kiss them all (excepting the tailor himself), and briefly explain what is written above, when there came a loud knock at the street door. That was the butcher,

Then another knock. That was a confectioner's man with a heavily laden tray on his head ; and scarcely was he dismissed, when, bang ! sounded the knocker again, and this time it was the fruiterer and green-grocer. Christmas morning though it was, Bill knew where to find shops that were open, and he and Aunt Clutterbuck had made the round of them together.

"And after all we have not quite spent all our money," said the kind old soul to the wondering Midget. "You had best take my purse, my dear, you know better than I do what it is you require. Get some one to help you, my love, or it will be dark before we can have dinner."

"Midge !" whispered Bill to his sister, "how came the table-cloth laid, and what makes such a powerful smell of roast pork ?"

Midget said nothing, but looked hard at her father.

"Bill, my boy !" remarked the tailor, "just lend me a hand with this hamper. We'll put it outside."

I am unable to narrate what took place between Bill and his father after the hamper and its contents were carried out of the room. The latter may have made full confession to his son, or he may simply have begged of him to make haste with the baking-dish to Duff's the baker's, in Whiffin Street, and to state to that tradesman that the dinner had been taken by mistake. Anyhow, it was returned to the place it had been purloined from, and it is fair to assume that those to whom it rightly belonged were too glad to get it back to ask many questions, which, of course, was lucky for Mr. Brewster.

It was luckier still that Midget and Bill agreed to

say nothing to Aunt Clutterbuck about the money-box. Otherwise it was very unlikely that she would have behaved so generously to him, not only as regards coming like a good fairy in the pantomime to provide him and his children with a magnificent Christmas dinner in place of a stolen one, but in formally undertaking to comfortably refurnish his place, and buy him and the children new clothes, and allow him a pound a week as long as he refrained from getting drunk. She is a strong-minded old lady, and she has given him to understand in a way that could leave no doubt on his mind that she meant it, and that if ever again he oversteps the bounds of sobriety the allowance will be stopped.

But between Aunt Clutterbuck, and myself, and the reader, it will be all right for Midget and Bill and the other children anyhow, even if he should so commit himself. And that's a comfort, since, in my opinion, he could no more keep quite sober for the space of a week, than the pig who furnished the stolen leg of pork could keep his snout out of the trough if he were hungry.

TOM THE TINKER.

ARRIVED at Mungo's Rents, the entry to which was, in a manner of speaking, a mere yard-wide crevice between the tall and dilapidated houses of old Mungo Street, we made our way, as directed, to number seven, the street door of which stood wide open, and was kept so by means of a couple of bricks. The doctor—whom the reader may remember as having assisted me to a study of a domestic drama, under the title of "Treble Guilt"—rapped at the parlour door with his walking-stick and inquired of the woman who responded, in what part of the house he should find Mr. Gollup.

She was an exceedingly dirty young woman, with a tangle of dark hair dangling untidily about her shoulders, and with her tattered old gown recklessly disarranged at her bosom, presumably for the convenience of the baby she held in her arms. To the doctor's inquiry, however, she shook her head ; nobody of the name of Gollup lived there. The Sullivans and the Kadgewicks lived on the next floor, and over them were the Bullwinkles, and the Pudseys, and the Earwackers, and in the top front there were old

Mother Shiner and her gals, and in the top back there was Tom the Tinker, which was the lot.

"I think it must be the individual you last mentioned I wish to see," remarked the medical gentleman. "The person who called at the surgery mentioned that the man was a tinker by trade. He has something amiss with his lungs, I believe?"

"Then it is Tom, no doubt," said the woman. "I should rather think he did have something the matter with some part of his innards. The wonder, to me, is that he hain't coughed hisself all to bits by this time."

"Has he any one nursing him?"

"Nobody that I know of, 'cept you can call nussing what little Scratcher does for him."

"And who is little Scratcher?"

A pitying expression came over the woman's face as she replied, "There, you ask me a question as I can't answer. But I know this much, he is one of the poorest little mites that you ever set eyes on. One of the skinniest and neglectedest, and one of the willingest and kind-heartedest, poor little chap. Fancy, sir, a child of not more than eight or nine doing what he does! Ever since the tinker has been bed-rid, more'n six weeks now, that morsel of a child has been the only one he has had to attend on him—cooking his bit of wittles, and making his gruel, and keeping the room tidy, and all the thanks he gets—ask Mother Shiner's gals in the next room if it isn't true—is being growled at, and swore at, and cussed as being the cause of Tom's bad luck and of his being laid on his back with his present illness."

"But how do the two exist if the tinker is unable to work?"

"Lor' A'mighty knows," replied the front parlour lodger. "He must have had a little bit of money, I suppose, when he was took too bad to go out with his barrer. But it must be all gone now, or very nearly, for I've noticed young Scratcher been going out every day now for more'n a week, since the cold weather set in, picking up bits of wood and cinders, and anything to make a fire with. Oh! here comes Scratcher;" and turning in the passage we saw the mite alluded to labouring up the broken steps of the house under a weight of timber.

I hope that he came by it honestly, but appearances did not altogether warrant that conclusion. The wood of which he was the bearer took the form of a post that had rotted at the foot, and in that decayed state had either fallen away of itself or been broken off. It was not a substantial or a tall post—to call it a stump, perhaps, would best describe it—but it was as much as Scratcher, who was but little more than three feet high himself, could well carry. When he discovered the doctor and myself in the passage, he dropped the jagged old stump, and looked embarrassed, and as though half resolved to turn and run for it.

The woman had not in the least exaggerated when she spoke of the child as "one of the skinniest and neglectedest." A poor little well-nigh shoeless, shirtless waif, with no cap to cover his overgrown head of hair, which, despite its towzled condition, was soft and silky-looking, and with a ragged jacket many sizes too

large for his bony frame, and his old corduroy trousers, more in need of patching than patched, and with make-shift "braces" consisting of a piece of string hitched on in front to a wooden skewer in lieu of a button. He continued to eye us shyly until my companion gave him an encouraging nod, and asked him if he was going up to Mr. Gollup's room. Scratcher, much relieved, replied in the affirmative, and taking up his load again proceeded up-stairs with it, we following.

Up the first flight and the second, but before we had reached as high we needed no further guidance as to the whereabouts of Tom the Tinker. He had seemingly been listening for Scratcher, and the moment he heard his footsteps began to let out in frightful language to the poor child. "Is that you at last, yer 'this, that, and the other' warmint? Cuss you, I wish I had your 'this and that' neck in my hands this moment, I'd give it a twist that would squeeze your young 'this, that, and the other' life out." And he was commencing another volley of the most awful abuse when his cough seized on him with such violence that we could hear his ramshackle old bedstead creaking and complaining he shook it so.

But the tiny Scratcher toiling on in front, and being by this time quite winded, lifting his load from stair to stair with a sounding bump, seemed not much moved by all Tom the Tinker's bullying and raving. "I'm a coming, Tom," he cried back, cheerfully, in reply. "I've got summat to make a fire, Tom. You won't talk about walloping when you see it. Such a

fire as we'll have afore you can count forty! Don't you say no more till you see!"

But by this time he had reached the back room on the top floor, the door of which stood ajar. A glance within disclosed a wretched spectacle. The tiny room, with its cobwebbed window, and at least half the panes patched with paper or with the holes in the glass plugged with rags, the carpetless floor, the bare walls, the dilapidated wooden bedstead lurching all awry as though weak at the knees, and Tom the Tinker himself sitting up in the bed with a faded old yellow counterpane clutched about his shoulders, leaning back against the wall panting and gasping from his recent attack. The woman in the front parlour had mentioned that it was six weeks since the tinker had been first confined to his bed. It was evident that he had taken to it all smutty from active employment, and was black now as then, excepting for the grime that had been rubbed off on the bed-clothes. As soon as he set eyes on poor Scratcher he was beginning to swear again, but the doctor checked him.

"I am sure, my good fellow, you have not so much breath to spare that you can afford to waste it so foolishly," he remarked. "Besides, the little chap, loaded as you see he is, could not have come quicker up the stairs."

"If he'd a fell down 'em all when he got to the top, and broke his thunderin' neck I shouldn't a-minded," growled Tom the Tinker, eyeing the child vindictively. "Lord send I'd never seed him. But it's the old story about 'arbourin' a wiper in your buzzum to turn and sting you."

The "wiper" by this time was busy on his knees at the fire-place, with the chunk of wood and an old chopper, and the doctor proceeded to examine his patient. He was looking very serious indeed before he had half finished.

"I don't know whether you are aware of it, my friend," said he, "but you are very bad."

"'Course, I am," answered the tinker, gruffly. "That's wot you've been sent for, your business is to put me right."

"That," replied the medical gentleman, "is quite impossible. Your case is beyond medical skill, I am sorry to say."

"All right," remarked the tinker, philosophically. "If you can't make a sound job of it, patch me up."

"Listen to me, Mr. Gollup," said the doctor kindly, and taking the tinker's corned and dirty hand in his own. "I can neither cure you nor patch you up. You are dying."

The man was lying down, but hearing these last ominous words, very gravely delivered, he rose up in the bed, not with a sudden start, but slowly and painfully, and with his staring eyes fixed on the doctor's unpromising face the while.

"I'm—I'm *what*?" he presently managed to gasp in dismay.

"In your sad condition you surely must have suspected such a possibility. It is not for me to say exactly how much longer you have to live, but so that you may make the best of the time remaining to you, it is my duty to inform you that you may probably not be here to-morrow."

Mr. Gollup had contrived to prop himself up, so that his head again leant against the wall, and his shoulders were once more enveloped in the old counterpane as when we first entered the room. The doctor's solemn words of warning seemed for the time to deprive him quite of the power of speaking. He could only stare, while beads of perspiration gathered thick on his soot-smirched forehead. At last he found his tongue.

"Not be yere to-morrer!" he ejaculated, "Lord's truth! Yer don't mean to tell me it is as close as that? Why! it's a'most as bad as being dead a'ready!"

"No, indeed, it is not. A man may have much to be sorry for and say many repentant prayers in a few hours," the doctor hinted.

"But here to-day," broke out the poor consumptive tinker, in a terror-stricken voice, "alive, and lookin' and movin' and talkin', and to-morrer ready to be buried. Why, I ain't nine-and-thirty till next birthday! It's a —— lie! I won't believe it!"

During this painful scene Scratcher was forgotten. We were conscious that he had succeeded with the chopper by hearing the wood crackling in the grate. But we had not noticed that he had caught something of the conversation between the doctor and his patient and had approached the bed, where he stood with his thin and dirty little hands clasped and his white face the picture of dismay.

"O, don't say he's dying, mister! don't, don't say such a cruel thing. Oh, dear, dear Tom, don't die and leave me all alone! And the child caught at one of

the tinker's hands, and laid his face on it, sobbing in his overwhelming grief.

Mr. Gollup's hard face softened strangely.

"What! you hain't a going to tell me, Scratcher, that you'll be sorry when I—when it—when to-morrow comes?" he said huskily.

"Oh I can't bear it! I can't bear it! I ain't got one friend but you to love me, Tom. No one else in the world!"

Mr. Gollup inserted a shaking finger between his throat and his shirt collar as though it was too tight, and while, with blinking eyes, he contemplated the bowed little head his mind seemed exercised with strange perplexity. "It's high time," he muttered, and speaking aloud his thoughts rather than addressing us, "it's high time it came to an end, when it comes to this. You, as I've been a cussin' of all your young life for being a crab on me and all my doin's—*you*, at this here time to be lovin' and sorry!"

He remained silent and with his eyes closed for at least a minute, while Scratcher was shedding tears on the horny hand and kissing it, and then said Tom the Tinker, half-whispering, to the doctor—

"If you can get him away for a little time, mister, I—I've got something to tell you about him."

Happily remembering how kindly-disposed the young woman who lived in the parlour had shown herself towards the boy, the doctor, after a few soothing words, led him out of the room and presently returned without him.

Mr. Gollup, who had said nothing for several minutes, and appeared to be engaged in shaping the

revelations he was about to make, began by abruptly asking the doctor if he considered him to be fully in his right mind?

"I have no reason to suppose otherwise," returned the doctor.

"I thought, p'r'aps, there might be a way of listening at a chap's head with that there trumpet thing, like you listened with awhile ago at my back and chest, and you could find out," remarked the tinker simply. "Because I should like you, aforehand, to feel sure about it. What I've got to tell about Scratcher—which hain't his name, mind yer, but only one I give him because of the queer kind o' birth mark of a bird's claw he has got on the back of his neck—what I've got to tell about him is altogether so rum, that afterwards, in speaking about me, you might say most likely he warn't in his right mind when he told it. And that's what I'm thinking about the avoidance of."

"If it is any satisfaction to you and will encourage you to speak only the truth and that fully," returned the doctor, "I tell you in the presence of this gentleman that, at the present time, I consider you to be in perfect possession of your mental faculties. Now, what about this poor child? I think I shall not be far wide of the mark if I guess how you came by it."

"P'r'aps you are good at guessing. How did I come by him?"

"You stole him, or you know who did."

"You are about as wide of the mark when you guess that," answered the tinker, with some show of irritability, "as from here to Westminster Abbey. That's how wide. No; I didn't steal the child at all,

I found it. Leastways, my wife, what's dead and gone, she found it, and she brought it home to me. She brought him to me in a carpet-bag, which holes had been made in the sides of, to let in the air. At that time I was a lodger in Friar-street, in the Blackfriars Road, and my missus she picked up the bag when she was coming through Nelson-square, the time being at half-past-six on the evening of the 18th of November, 1876. And now," remarked Tom the Tinker, whose breath was so short that he could speak but slowly, "if I'm speaking in the langwidge of a man who is in any way cranky, you had best tell me before I go any further."

The doctor again assured him that he entertained no doubts on the matter.

"It were then and there that the child were found in a carpet-bag, as aforesaid," continued Mr. Gollup, "by my missus, and brought home to me. She had no idea what it was, having no opportunity for looking into it, the ketch of it being fastened, but, judging from its weight, which was a dead 'un, in consequence of something of a sleeping natur' being give to the young 'un, and the bag being a respectable 'un, she thought it was werry likely suits of clothes, dropped accidental, 'stead of going on a railway journey. When we opened it, it were nat'rally a disap'intment to us, with that amount of savageness on my part—I'd been drinking—that I felt like chucking the blessed kid out o' winder more than anything else.

"But like all women, my missus was for being soft over it, and pitying it, as she sat a warming it before the fire, and trying to get some life in it. We could

tell it wasn't dead, but it had had such a dose of lodnum, or some stuff or other, that it lay just as if it was. We didn't have any young 'uns of our own, and if I had give her only half a word of encouragement she would have kep' it there and then. But I warn't that disposition myself. P'r'aps I might ha' been if I'd been brought up different," said Mr. Gollup apologetically, "but I was brought up hindifferent. My idea was to make the best of our find. The child was well-dressed, had on a quite a swell kind of a bedgownd, with lace on it, and besides being wrapped in a shawl that would have pawned—fact it *did* pawn—for fifteen shillin's, and besides that there was a bundle of babby's clothes for it to wear.

"'What are you going to do with it?' I asked her, tired of seeing her fussing over the young 'un.

"'You know, Tom, what I should like to do with it,' ses she; 'but I suppose it had best be took to the police-station just as it is.' But I swore at her for being a fool.

"'If it's took to the police-station,' I says, 'it will be sent from there to the workus, and the workus will get the benefit of the clothes and the shawl. Therefore, since the workus is bound to have it, why shouldn't we get the benefit of the things for our trouble?'

"She fired up at that, and called me a hard-hearted brute, and wuss than a heathen, for robbing a poor outcast babe; but she see that my temper was getting up, and she knew that I was a hot 'un when I started on her, so there was nothing for her but to do what I told her to, which was to take off the laced frock and

that, and to take out the shawl and the bundle of clothes, and put back the wool which the child had to lay on, and to roll the young 'un up in her old apron and take it in the bag and plant it somewhere for somebody else to pick up and do what they like with it. Well, gentlemen, after a lot of snivelling, she does as I tells her, and she goes off with the bag and the young one still in its deep sleep, and she takes it Kennington way, and she put it on the steps of a gentleman's house.

"So she tells me when she come back. But I'd found something while she was gone. I was a looking over the bundle of babby clothes to get a idea as to the value of 'em, when I comes on a letter wrapped in one of the flannels. It were writ in plain handwriting, otherwise, not being much of a scholar, I shouldn't have been able to make it out. What it said was this—

"'The unfortinit mother of this dear infant meekly begs and prays of them wot finds it to treat it kindly, or to take it where it will be so treated. It is to save its life that she, though in bitter sorrer, thus for a time parts with it, but she makes a solemn promise to her unknown friend that in time she will claim her child, and that, as far as money can repay him, he shall be amply satisfied. If he is a poor man he shall be made rich. The child may always be known, since it has a birth-mark, like the claw of a bird, on its throat, and it is under the word "Bird's claw" its parents will, sooner or later, advertise for it.'

"I'd spelt out the letter by the time my missus came back and told me where she had been and

what she had done. Then, I tell you what I says to her, werry much to her astonishment ; you may take your davy. ‘ You hook it off as hard as you can and bring it back here ! ’ For, don’t you see, I’d turned that letter over in my mind, and thought the speckerlation was good enough. It was getting late by that time, and she said she would rayther I’d go with her, if I didn’t mind. So I went. We went together to Kennington, and she showed me the house. It was dark, there being no light in the passage, or in any of the winders, and I slipped into the front garden to the front door, and felt at the spot where she told me for the bag, and it was gone ! And now,” said Mr. Gollup, after pausing awhile for breath, “ I’m a-coming to the part concerning which it was my hobject when I asked you to convince yourself before I made a start that I was in my right senses. For s’elp me, and I tell you fair before hand, it’s much like wot you read in story books as new pins are alike in the same packet.

“ It must have been quite a hour from the time when my missus left the bag at the door till when we went back to look for it, so it was no wonder it was gone, and ’course we reckoned that somebody belonging to the house had took it in. So we came away, and was walking along on the side opposite to where Kennigton Park is, when I see somebody hurrying along quick on that there side, and as he passed a gas lamp my eyes were good enough to make out that he was carrying that there very carpet-bag we had come after. He was sticking close to the park railin’s as though not perticklerly wanting

anybody to see him, which was the fust thing that set me wondering what he was up to. If it was the chap who lived at the house where the young'un had been took in, and he was now going to take it to the station-house, what did he want to sneak along with it for? 'You follow on, keeping a bit behind,' I ses to the missus, 'while I keep him in sight.'

"I could do that easy enough without him seeing me creeping in the shadder of the houses on the t'other side of the way, but he hadn't gone far when I lost sight of him for a moment at a dark spot, and the next I see of him is cutting back, *without the bag*, the way he had come!

"Waiting till he was out of sight I crossed over, and there was the bag stood against the park railin's.

"I could feel by the weight of it that what we had last seen in it had not been took out. And when my missus she comes up wondering, ses she, 'Very likely the poor little child is dead, and was found so, and that is why them that found it got rid of it again for fear of getting into trouble about it.' But just while she was talking we heard the young'un in the bag crying. So that was all right so far.

"Well, we made haste home with it expectin' to find none other than that it was all the same as when we packed it up for the first droppin'. But it wasn't so by a blessed long difference. It had been took out and wrapped up in a big woollen muffler thing the genelman wear round their throats in winter time, and pinned to it was a letter with something lumpy in it, and when I opened it, there, in a bit of paper,

was a couple of sovereigns! Now," and the tinker paused again in his narrative to cough, "look me in the heye—both of you—and tell me *now* if you see any crankiness there? You don't? Werry good, then.

"The writing in the letter wasn't much, and was done with pencil:—'The finder of this is most earnestly requested, for charity's sake, to do the best that can be for the poor little creature, and to provide it with Christian burial.'

"That was a staggerer, that was, Christian burial, and here was the kid alive and squalling, while my missus was a huggin' and a kissin' of it! We was hard up at the time—didn't have as much as a tanner ready money in the house, and these two sovereigns seemed like a Gord-send. It seemed like two quid on account of the answer that we was to get when that advertisement, the first word of it being 'Bird's claw,' came out in the newspapers. So I took a bottle, and made haste to go and get a half-pint o' rum, before the houses was shut up. And the missus having give the babby some wittles went to bed along of it, while I set up smoking and drinking, and turnin' over in my mind what had best be done.

"And what I turned it into was this. Mind yer, I ain't bragging of it. If you ask me now, not 'specting to live I tell you honestly, gentlemen both, that it was thunderin' mean, and that I hope to be forgive for it. I turned it over, and what I made of it was this: Here's a chap that finds a young'un in a bag. He takes it into his house and he thinks as how it's

dead. Being a nervous chap and same time kind-arted, he's afeared that it'll be orkard for him if he goes to the police, so he puts it back, and in the kindness of his 'art two pounds as well, and he re-drops it. Werry well. Then the way to make something more out of him would be to make out that the young'un was dead, and to go and see him about it in the mornin'!

"Which I did do," presently continued Mr. Gollup with labouring breath, for the exertion of long talking was telling on him. "I went next morning and did it. I found him just such a gentleman for my purpose as though I had ordered him, and he had been made to medjer. An old chap, very shaky and with no wife nor nothing. I put the case to him. I was a-goin' by his house the night before, and I see him come out with a carpet-bag and I follered him a-carrying it till he got to the park railin's, where he set it down and I picked it up finding a dead child in it, and a letter in his hand-writing showing as much affection as though it was his own, though, perhaps, a sly'un, and a couple of sovereigns to pay for it to be buried on the quiet. 'And what do you make of all that, you rascal,' said the old gent, facing round on me. "'Ow do I know?' I says, naturally riled at being talked to in that manner. 'What do *you* make of it? Did you kill the young'un or didn't you? Anyhow, who's is it if it ain't yourn, and where did you get it from?' 'I found it on my doorstep an hour before,' says he, 'and I know no more about the poor little creatur' than you do.' 'And yet,' says I, 'you write that werry

affectionate letter o' recommendation for it and give two sovereigns to'rds its being buried !'

"That there view of it staggered him, and after walking about the room a bit he says—

"And what is it *you* want?'

"To come to business in a plain and straight-forward way,' I says, 'I want to be paid to keep my mouth shut. I ain't a greedy man. Give me a couple of pound more and I'll see that the child is buried, and you won't hear any more about it.'

"And the shaky old chap agreed to it and handed over his money. It warn't the last two sovereigns I had of him by many a score. 'Course when he had once put his foot in it I had him, and could bleed him just when I liked. I went on a bleeding him till Scratcher—I called him that because of his mark of a bird's claw—was four year old, when the old chap died, and there was an end to that, and I had the boy on my hands a incumbrance. I've had him ever since, my missus being dead now nigh three years, and I tell you I've allers looked on him in the light of a hard bargain, not so much on account of his keep as because he brought me bad luck. I left off prosperin' ever since the old chap I used to draw as good as a pound a week of died, and I hain't prospered since, which seems to p'int to my calkerlation as to his being a spell on me being the correct one. I should have got rid of him long ago only that I've been always a-looking for that adwertisement. I never thought that I should be glad without the adwertisement but I didn't get rid of him. But I am free and hearty I confess arter

them words of his before you took him down-stairs, I am gladder than I can say that I shall have him along o' me till—till to-morrer !”

And, sure enough, the doctor's prognostication proved to be correct. Mr. Gollup departed this life at noon of the day following. He has been dead some time now, but that advertisement commencing “Bird's claw” has not yet appeared, which is much to be regretted, because, meanwhile, poor Scratcher is in the workhouse.

AN UNEXPLAINED MYSTERY.

IT was past one o'clock in the morning, and piercingly cold, with a drizzle of sleety rain falling, when I found myself in the neighbourhood of Clapham Common, with but a dismal prospect of reaching my home, which is at Stoke Newington, except by trudging through the mud and darkness for at least a portion of the eight miles that lay between.

A dismal prospect, notwithstanding that when I reached the cab-stand to which the friend at whose house I had been visiting had directed me, there was a cab in waiting. Only one, however. A "four-wheeler," and the driver was at first glance not to be seen. The side lamps of the vehicle were dimly burning, however, and, shining on the cab-window, revealed the individual I was in search of fast asleep within, with only his nose visible between his down-pulled sou'-wester and the upturned collar of his overcoat. It was a dilapidated and mouldy-looking turn-out altogether, and with drooping head and ears, the gaunt gray horse in the shafts, who was bare-ribbed and bent at the knees, was fast asleep as its

master. It was altogether such an unpromising-looking conveyance that I was more than half-resolved to leave it undisturbed and try my fortune further on, when, roused from its slumber—probably by a bad dream—the quadruped in the shafts woke with a start and shudderingly shook his harness with a sound that woke the old cabman. He at once lowered the door-sash and civilly inquired if I wanted him.

“I want,” said I, “to get as far as Stoke Newington; but you, probably, do not care to go such a long distance.”

“Care or not, sir,” he replied, alighting lamely from the vehicle; “I shall have to go pretty nigh as far to get back from where I came. I was only giving the mare a rest before we made a start. Eight miles off the reel is rayther too much for you, hain’t it, old gal?” he remarked, affectionately patting the nose of the gaunt gray, “and you in your twenty-third year. But this is a slice of luck we didn’t look for,” he continued, as he busied himself to make ready for a start, “and you shall have a warm mash for your cold, old lady, ’sure as ever you get back to your stable, though I shall have to make a fire and get it ready for you before I can turn into bed myself. Jump inside, sir! I shan’t overcharge you, you may make your mind easy about that.”

“If it comes to that,” said I, “you, too, may as well start with an easy mind, if a knowledge of how much you will get from me at the journey’s end will give it you. You will get six shillings, my friend, neither more nor less.”

“You are a gentleman,” replied the old fellow

gratefully, "and we will do our best to earn it in a creditable kind of a manner, won't we, old lady?"

But, either the "old lady" was deaf, and did not hear the indirect appeal to her to put her best foot foremost as the saying is, or, as is more likely, with the best will in the world to second her master's efforts, she was physically incapable of doing so, we had not proceeded a mile before I had come to the conclusion that, making it a question of speed, I should have done better had I walked. About four miles an hour seemed to be the most the gaunt gray mare could accomplish, and probably it would have been much less but for the incessant chucklings and chirpings of encouragement with which the old cabman urged her to her best. In addition to this, the cab itself was such a rickety affair, with the windows rattling and the wind blowing in at a dozen chinks, that by the time we had reached Brixton Church, I had serious thoughts of cancelling our contract. But when I reflected on what a kind-hearted old fellow he had shown himself towards the horse, and how disappointed he would be, and how it would upset his calculations even to the extent, perhaps, of depriving the wheezy old gray of the promised warm bran mash, I resolved to resort to a compromise, and try if riding beside him on the driving seat would be more endurable. My overcoat was warm and weatherproof, and I had my pipe and plenty of tobacco, of which the old gentleman thankfully accepted a portion for immediate consumption, and I was soon convinced that the change was for the better.

Of course we fell into conversation, and our talk at

first was of night cabs and night cabmen, and the miserable small earnings the latter had to be content with as compared with the gains of his brother of the whip who drove a cab in the daylight. Speaking for himself, although the cab and horse were his own, if he could clear on an average, and when all his expenses were paid, three-and-sixpence or four shillings a night, he thought himself lucky. Sometimes he had a bit of good fortune, as to-night; but perhaps to-morrow night he would put on a stand at six o'clock in the evening and remain there without "turning a wheel" until it was time to go and see if anything was to be picked up at the railway stations when the early morning trains came in. But he was better off, he informed me, than many that he knew who worked for hard masters. They were expected, somehow or other, to bring home six or seven shillings for the night's hiring, and very often they would not take enough to cover it, to say nothing of earning anything for themselves, and would have to borrow or pawn to make up the deficiency before they were allowed to take the cab out again.

"Why, then, do they prefer to be night rather than day cabmen?" I asked him.

"They don't prefer it; they can't help themselves," he replied. "Nine out of every ten night cabmen are used-up day men, just as about a similar proportion of night horses and four-wheeled cabs are used up and lame poor old crocks and ramshackle old rabbit hutches nobody would think of sending out during daylight. The men are unfit for day cabs mostly on account of their being afflicted in some way or other—

a great many of them suffering from rheumatism. I'm a martyr to it myself," continued the old cabman wincing. "It is that that caused the lameness of my right leg, and makes me about six times as long as I ought to be getting up and down to my box."

"But, surely, you and other poor fellows, being afflicted with rheumatism, is a strange reason why you consider yourselves fitter for night than day duty, compelled, as you are, to be out in all weathers, too?"

"Well, of course it is so much the worse for a man's feelings," responded the patient old martyr to one of the most distressing ailments to which humanity is liable; "but, don't you see, the public are not aware of it. A night cabman hain't looked to to be so nimble, and if he is in any pain, in the dark he can grin and bear it, and nobody the wiser."

"But, if you had your choice, you would rather drive a day cab?"

"Well," said he, after considering the proposition for a few seconds, "looking at it in what you may call the habstract, and considering that I was sixty-seven last birthday, I don't deny that if I could, without being a selfish beggar, choose between the two, I would rayther make the change. But as I couldn't, on account of my being sitiuated so pecooliarly at home, make it without being a selfish beggar, I'd rayther things be as they are."

"How do you mean, peculiarly situated?"

"It is in this way, you see. My old lady—my wife, I mean—she's strong and hearty, and she most days in the week goes out charing or washing, which,

of course, brings in a lot of money, but she is as tired as a dog, poor soul! when she comes home and wants a night's rest. If I slept at home she couldn't get it. Bless you, no. As soon as I get warm atween the blankets my gnawings begin, and then I am groaning and shifting from one side to t'other for hours before I can get to sleep. Very well, then, now see how, by what you may call a kind of providence, things are made to fit in and 'commodate themselves! Me being out all night with the cab, she is able to take her nat'ral rest in a proper and undisturbed sort of a manner, and I get home in the morning in time for the old gal to give me my breakfast, and then she toddles off to work, and I turn into bed, when, being alone, I can toss about and groan before I get to sleep as much as I like and without interfering with anybody."

It was but an insignificant tribute to pay to such splendid unselfishness, but there and then I resolved to make the promised six shillings, seven-and-six-pence. And, after all, I don't know but that the extra eighteenpence might have done him more good than the highest compliment it was possible to pay him.

"There is one thing in connection with driving a night cab that has always occurred to me," I remarked, by way of giving the conversation a turn, "and that is the dreary monotony of the occupation."

The old cabman indulged in a quiet chuckle ere he made answer: "You'll excuse me, sir, but you never was wronger in your life than in that last obserwation. Of course, a great deal depends on a man's powers of taking notice, but there is a lot of knowledge—

not the less interesting because it is mostly of a queer sort—to be picked up by a night cabman. They talk about the ‘mysteries of London.’ I believe that quite as many of them are worked out with the assistance of night cabs as by any other means.”

“And not a few,” I ventured to remark, “with the connivance of night cabmen.”

“Well, appearances may sometimes p'int to that conclusion,” he reluctantly assented, “but you may take my word for it, sir, they are not always to be relied on. I can answer for that from my own experience, and that of others as well. It may look as though he was in the swim, and all the time the man be as innocent of knowing anything about the game he has been assisting in as anybody who was twenty miles away at the moment. I could give you a dozen instances of it if I could only pull my memory together a bit.”

“Try and remember one instance.”

“Well, I shan't have far to go for that, sir,” returned my loquacious driver, “not further than my own brother. He's dead now, poor old boy, but he was a night cabman for a good many years, and it was while acting as such that he came across the rummiest adventure you or any other man ever heard tell of. The worst of it was he never could get anybody but them that knew him well enough to be aware that it wasn't his habit to tell crammers to believe him.”

“His brother cabmen believed in him, of course?”

“His brother cabmen, sir,” returned the old fellow in tones of disgust, “were harder on him than anybody. They nicknamed him the ‘Hatchet Thrower’

from that very time ; not only in ordinary conversation and to his head, but in print as well. On the cards for raffles and benefit concerts, among the names of them that supported the affair he appeared as the 'Hatchet Thrower.' And, no doubt you understand, sir, to call a man by such a name as that, is only a perlte way of calling him a liar, which my brother Dick was not by a very long way."

"How, then, did it happen that his veracity was so generally doubted on the occasion you allude to?"

"Well, the fact is if you come to regard it from a outsider's point of view, or from a one-sided one—which is pretty sure to be the way a policeman would look at it—it mayn't seem to have been the kind of story that one would swallow without first chewing it over a bit. Where my brother Dick was wrong was in not taking more time to consider what he had best do. If he had left it until the following morning, and then gone to the police-station and had his say, and produced his evidence calm and collected, it might have been different. But he was that honest and straightforward and impetuous-like, that he couldn't wait. Very nat'rally, I think, he concluded that something horrible had happened, and for all he knew if he kept his mouth shut too long he might be suspected of having had a hand in it. So off he drives straight, as soon as his strange adventure was at an end, and he was free to do so, to the station-house. He makes his appearance there about four o'clock one winter's morning, and I must admit under what might be called suspicious-looking circumstances. He was without his hat for one thing, and he had a

confused look and very likely a unsteady manner of speaking, which the police, of course, put down to the effects of drinking, but which you will understand when I come to explain all about it. He insisted on seeing the inspector in charge, who very likely was woke out of taking a nap by the fire, and was disagreeable in consequence, and to him he told the following singular story. It is a long time," said my old cabman, "since I heard it myself, but when my poor brother Dick was alive he was never tired of repeating it, and it isn't likely I shall forget much of it, if you could like to hear it."

I replied that I should like it very much.

"Then you shall have it," said he, "and the best way will be for me to tell you the tale as my brother told it to the police-inspector.

"I was returning," says he, "towards London from Bayswater, having just before set down a fare. I was in the act of lighting my pipe, as I stood on the pavement, having got down to shut the cab-door after my fare had got out, when there came along two men dressed respectable, but not being what may be called gentlemen. They appeared out of a side street, and seemed in a hurry. They wanted, they said, to get to Marylebone-lane, in Oxford-street, as quick as I could drive them, and they wasn't particular to a shilling as regarded the fare. They were both young men and tall, but I wouldn't be sure of recognizing them again, 'cept from the voice of one of them. That one was smoking a cigar, and he rode outside with me, and the other man got inside. It was a dark night, with wind and rain, and being a quiet

neighbourhood as well, we met with few people as we drove along. We were within about a quarter of a mile of the Marble Arch, when the man by my side said something about finding another cigar, and stood up to feel in his pocket, and then, all on a sudden, he threw one arm round my throat, and with his other hand tried to press a handkerchief over my face. I struggled, and struck him in the face with the butt end of my whip, but he still held tight hold of me, and having the reins still in my hand I pulled at them, and the horse stopped. Then the other man jumped out of the cab and came to the assistance of the first one, helping him hold the handkerchief to my nose, and then my senses seemed to leave me all in a moment.

"I don't know what happened directly after that, or whether I fell off, or they lifted me down off the driving seat. I came to myself a bit presently, and then I was inside my cab with them, and my coat had been taken off, and I was in my shirt-sleeves, and one of the two men was putting on my coat, which had the badge attached to one of the buttons, and he already had my sou'-wester cap on. They didn't seem to expect that I should come-to so soon, and the moment I began to holler and struggle, the handkerchief was clapped to my face again, and again I lost my senses. I don't know how long for, but when I recovered consciousness I was in some house, and sitting down with something tied over my eyes and with my hands tied together at the wrists behind me. I was in a rare fright, and, starting up from the chair, began to holler 'Help!' and 'Murder!' when a

woman's voice spoke to me, and told me I needn't be afraid, and that no harm should come to me if I kept quiet for a little time. 'My horse and cab,' she said, 'had merely been borrowed for an hour or two, and that she expected the return of them that had borrowed it every minute. It would be brought back,' she said, 'uninjured, and I would be paid for the use of it at a rate that would leave me no cause for grumbling.' It sounded like the voice of a young woman, and her language was such as a lady and not a common person would use. But it wasn't likely I was going to suffer such treatment and submit tamely to it, and I told her so pretty roughly, and asked her why my cab had been taken from me, and why I had been drugged and brought to that house, wherever it was, and tied and blindfolded. But all the answer I could get out of her was that I should do myself more harm than good making a noise. 'There was no harm meant in borrowing my cab,' she repeated. 'It was only by way of a joke, and to win a foolish wager one of the two gentlemen I had seen had made with the other, and if I would wait patiently for a short time I should find that I had done a good night's work.' So I waited without saying anything more, and presently I heard the sound of a cab stopping in the street, and then I heard the street-door opened, and the noise of men's footsteps in the passage, and somebody came into the parlour where I was. A man spoke, but I did not remember it to be the same voice as that of the men who had hired my cab in the Bayswater-road.

"You have been in a rare funk, cabby, I'll war-

rant,' he said laughingly, 'but we'll make it right with you. We have not quite done with you yet, though. We are going to give you a short ride in your own cab, and then pay you well for your trouble, and leave you.'

"They were two to one, and me being an elderly man, I should have had no chance struggling with them, so I did as they bade me, and, still with the bandage over my eyes, was led out of the house and into the cab, and the door was shut quick, and some one on the box drove away. One man was with me, and I soon found that I was not sitting on a cushion, and I put up my foot to the other side and discovered that the cushion that should have been there was missing as well. I asked the man what had been done with both of them? 'Never mind about the cushions; they've gone fishing,' he says, laughing, 'but you shall be paid for them.'

"'What have you done with my coat?' I asked him. I had been in my shirt-sleeves all this time.

"'Here it is,' he made answer. 'I have been wearing it, but it is none the worse for that, and your badge is all right, too. Let me help you on with your coat.'

"But he couldn't do that with my hands tied together, and I heard him open a knife, with which he cut the string they were tied with.

"'Where's my cap?' I asked him.

"'That you can't have,' he says, coolly; 'your cap has gone astray somehow, and you will have to do

without it, but it shall be reckoned in to be paid for with the other damages.'

"And then I heard the chink of money, and he said, 'Hold out your hand. You know what a sovereign is by the touch of it, I'll wager, and can tell a good one from a bad one. Catch hold—here are five, and don't after that say that we have not treated you handsomely.'

"‘I can't,' said I, 'if I don't know who you are. I am satisfied. You have had your spree out, and you have paid for it. Let me have a look at you,' and I snatched off the bandage that all this time had covered my eyes. But I couldn't see well then, for it was still almost dark, and the lamps at the sides of my cab had been put out. But I could make out enough of him to feel satisfied that he wasn't one of the men who had hired my cab at first. He was stouter, and his face was white, and showing quite plainly all down one cheek there were raw red streaks as though made with a woman's nails.

"I don't know who it was driving the cab, but at that moment it was pulled up. 'I am going to get out here,' the man in the cab said to me; 'but, take my advice, don't you be in too much of a hurry to get out with the idea of following me or my friend. You say that you are satisfied with the money I have given you. Let that clear all scores between us. If you attempt to follow us or give any alarm it will be the worse for you, so I give you fair warning.'

"I was still so bewildered and sick-feeling, which,

I suppose, was in consequence of being drugged, that I hadn't got my clear senses about me. He got out, and the man who had been driving got down, and I could hear that they both ran away, not in the same, but in different directions. I did not attempt to go after them. I am an old man, and they were two young 'uns, and there was that in the tone of the voice of the chap who said it might be the worse for me that left no doubt in my mind but that he meant it. It wouldn't have been much use if I had attempted it, for, as I have already said, it was still dark, and when I did get out of my cab, which couldn't have been more than half a minute afterwards, they were clean gone out of sight. So I set about looking to my cab and horse to find out how much damage had been done to them.

"As I have already mentioned to you, the side lamps had been extinguished, but I had a match in my pocket and I lit them again, and the moment I did so I saw that the right cuff of my coat was torn, and that there was blood on it—not much, only a few spots—as though it had spurted or splashed. Both the inside cab cushions were gone, and a piece of cloth as large as my hand had been torn out of the back squab, as though to destroy the evidence of a stain. More than that, one of the door-windows were broken, and there were splashes of blood plainly to be seen on the splintered glass and on the back squab. Where the piece had been torn out there were wet finger-marks made with a bleeding hand.

"That was all the damage, excepting the loss of

my hat. 'There is my cab and horse at the door at this moment,' said my brother Dick to the police-officer, bringing his story to a conclusion, 'and now the next thing for you to do is to come outside where my cab is waiting, and in the same state as when it was restored, and judge for yourself if I have told you anything but the truth. There is one other thing,' says my brother, 'that I forgot to mention, and that is that from the look of the cab-wheels and the state the horse is in that whoever went away with it took it somewhere where there was water and a wet clay soil close by. The horse is splashed with it up to the blinkers of her bridle, and I am ready to take my oath that there wasn't a speck of clay on it at the time it was taken out of my charge.'

"That, sir," said my old cabman, "was the straight-for'ard and circumstantial story Dick told to the police-inspector, and what d'ye think he did?"

"In the first place, I suppose that he accepted your brother's invitation, and came out and examined the cab?"

"That's just what he did do, sir, and then he turns round on Dick and he says—

"'What do you mean by bringing your cock-and-bull stories here? What sort of game is it you are trying on?'

"'It is no game of mine, whatever it is,' my brother Dick makes reply; 'but if you ask me what my opinion of it all is, my answer is that it seems to me to smell very much like murder.'

"'And if you wish to have *my* opinion,' says the

inspector in his bullying way, 'it smells a precious sight more of a drunken shindy in which you have been something more than an innocent spectator. You couldn't stand steady,' he says, 'when you first came in without holding on to the edge of the table, and you smelt of rum as though you had been soaking in it.'

"'I own to being overcome,' says my brother, 'but it was the chloroform, or whatever the stuff was, that did it.' But the inspector — he was one of those conceited chaps who, if he took it into his head that he could see through a brick wall, would set about proving that he could—had got his own ideas about the matter, and he stuck to 'em. It was all as plain to him, he said, as A B C. My brother had picked up with some fellows with more money than brains on the spree, and they had given him as much as he liked to drink. There had been skylarking, or a fight, perhaps, going on in the cab, and the cushions had got thrown out and the window broken, which accounted for the cut hand and the blood smears and the torn squab. As for the loss of my brother Dick's cap, that was nothing, the knowing inspector said. He might have thrown it away himself to heighten the effect.

"'But if it is all gammon what I've been telling you,' says my brother, who, naturally enough, was getting savage, 'what the blazes should I come to you at all for?'

"'To save yourself from getting into trouble with your master when you took the cab back to the yard,' said the inspector, laying his finger at the side of his

nose. 'I can see through the whole tale as plainly as though it was made of window-glass. You can take my advice, and pay for the damage to the cab out of the five pounds the swells gave you for the purpose, and don't let us have any more romancing, or you may get yourself into trouble.'

"But my brother had told only the truth, and he wouldn't flinch from it, and he told the cab-master he worked for all that he had told the police, paying down out of his five pounds five-and-thirty shillings for the missing cushions and the cab window. But the rummiest part of it was that the cab-master and the men in the yard no more believed him than the inspector did, and, as I have already told you, 'Hatchet Thrower' was the nickname he went by ever afterwards."

"Nothing transpired, then, tending to prove that your brother Richard's notion that a tragedy had been perpetrated was correct?"

"How could anything transpire when the police themselves wouldn't hear of any other version of the story being the true one but their own version? The only clue that ever come to light—and that the police declined to take any notice of—was one of the cab cushions that was washed ashore a couple of months afterwards t'other side of Putney Bridge."

"And your brother believed up to the last that a murder, or, at all events, a desperate outrage, had been committed?"

"Up to the very last, sir. I was with him when he died, and it wasn't more than a hour before when he

remarked, 'I suppose, Peter, I shall learn the rights of that Bayswater mystery shortly.' So you may judge from that whether he believed in it or no."

And, just as it happened, my journey and the old cabman's story terminating together, I gave him seven-and-sixpence, and he went his way reiterating his promise to the old gray mare that she should have a warm bran mash as soon as they got home.

THE WITCH OF BLUE ANCHOR ALLEY.

SCRUMPITT was his name, and though commonly addressed as "Doctor," it was well known that he possessed no certificated qualification entitling him to that distinction. Nevertheless, he made more money than many a struggling M. D. holding a legitimately-acquired diploma. Really, Dr. Scrumpitt was a pedlar, and did business by privilege of a pedlar's license. He travelled the country with a wonderful antibilious pill, the component parts of which were known only to himself, and which was extensively patronized by the simple villagers of Surrey, Kent, and Sussex; and this miraculous medicine, together with a poor man's plaister—likewise his own invention—and a never-failing remedy for all manner of lung diseases and likewise for lumbago, comprised his sole stock-in-trade, with which, in his smart little chaise-cart, he invariably set out on Monday and returned on the following Saturday afternoon with an empty cart, a bulky purse, and the pleasant consciousness of having mitigated the sufferings of his fellow-creatures.

He was a man of jovial disposition, and liked

cheerful company when he had leisure to enjoy it, and on Saturday evenings he patronized the parlour at the Nine Nutmegs. He was generally looked up to by the company assembled there, both on account of his superior intelligence and his seemingly inexhaustible fund of anecdotes and stories. Some of the most marvellous narratives ever heard or read of had been told in the snug parlour of the Nutmegs by Dr. Scruppitt to a breathless audience. Indeed, were it not that his veracity was beyond question, his tales at times were of such an extraordinary kind that a sceptical person might have been pardoned had he received them with some amount of incredulity. But the familiar ease with which he reeled off even his more indigestible yarns gave them a complexion of truth that at all events imposed silence on doubters, if any happened to be present. The best of it was, it could never be told, five minutes beforehand, that the doctor was about to treat the company to anything exceptionally good. The most ordinary remark made in common conversation would sometimes start him. As, for example, on the evening when it was my good fortune to be spending a social half-hour at the Nutmegs, the talk turned on men of wealth, and the exceedingly small beginning of many of them, and various instances were quoted by members of the parlour company.

"Lor' bless you," presently remarked Dr. Scruppitt, "I've known men who have owed the beginning of their prosperity to circumstances much more singular, not to say romantic, than any that have been yet mentioned. There's nobody here, I suppose,

old enough to remember my Uncle Leatheredge, the ship-chandler, of Shadwell?"

Nobody present could remember Uncle Leatheredge, but several gentlemen expressed a desire to hear what it was in his history that was so remarkable.

"Well," resumed Dr. Scrumpitt, with perfect seriousness, "his prosperous career originated in his being murdered."

"Murdered!" echoed more voices than one.

"And buried," said the doctor, with unflinching solemnity.

A silence of several seconds ensued, which was presently broken by a retired haberdasher, who respectfully remarked—

"When you just now said, Doctor, that your uncle owed the beginning of his prosperity to being murdered, you probably meant that that tragic event was the cause of his departing from this world to a better, where——"

"He did not depart from this world for at least five-and-thirty years after the occurrence I have alluded to," Dr. Scrumpitt interrupted the speaker. "Nine months after my uncle was exhumed he married, and had a large family. A *very* large family, or, perhaps, I should have figured in his will when at last he died."

"But, my dear sir," mildly remonstrated the haberdasher, "it could not possibly have happened. You can hardly expect us to believe——"

"I don't expect you to believe or even to express an opinion until you have heard the tale through from beginning to end," said Dr. Scrumpitt, again

peremptorily interrupting the speaker, though with a twinkle in his eyes. "Were I to ask you at the present moment, 'Do you believe in witchcraft?' you would very likely reply in the negative; but I tell you beforehand that it was through the agency of witchcraft that my Uncle Leatheredge was not only recovered from the tomb, but his murderer made to pay a very heavy penalty for his crime. And now, if you will abstain from asking further questions, I'll proceed to tell you all about it.

"I must go back to the time when the Shadwell ship provision business was carried on in the name of Shoveller and Wryneck; but Shoveller was dead, and Wryneck was the sole proprietor. It was old Shoveller who had the bulk of the money. He had, some years previous to his demise, taken it into his head to adopt a child who was found friendless in the streets. It was a girl, and she grew up to be an exceedingly good-looking young woman, and old Shoveller loved her as though he had been her own father.

"She had only just turned her eighteenth year when old Mr. Shoveller died, having made ample provision for her, and before his death he exacted a solemn promise from his partner, Peter Wryneck, that he would protect and watch over her until such time as she was capable of managing her own affairs, or found somebody worthy to be her husband who would manage them for her. Peter promised this willingly enough. He would have done it without any promise at all, since—and this, gentlemen, is the pivot on which my story turns—he himself was in love with pretty Margaret, and would have given almost the ten toes

off his feet to have made him as many years younger, so that his offering her his hand and heart would have appeared so much the less preposterous. Not that he was so old as Mr. Shoveller, his late partner. He had been Shoveller's shop-boy, when the ship-chandler was already established in a thriving business, but he was advanced in years, for all that. Very likely he may have been between fifty and sixty. I cannot say exactly. Anyhow, he was not the individual a handsome young woman would choose for a husband. I never saw him in the flesh, but I have seen what is said to be a good likeness of him, and he must have been a tall and thin man, with a scraggy neck and large ears, and with thin wisps of carrotty hair made the most of over his bald head. By the terms of Mr. Shoveller's will Margaret was not to touch the money left her until she was twenty-one. But she thought little or nothing about that; what grieved her was that her late adopted father should have made his partner her guardian, though not in a legal sense, for she hated him as much as it was possible for such a kind-hearted creature to hate any one. Like the crafty old fox he was, Peter Wryneck made the most of the guardianship that had been deputed to him, and so twisted the verbal terms of it as to insinuate to Margaret herself that, although, of course, he dare not hope for such a realization of heaven on earth, nothing would more delight the old man's spirit, if it was still hovering in this mundane sphere, than to see them made one according to the ceremony of matrimony. He never went so far as to put it to the young woman undisguisedly in this light. He merely hinted it

whenever a favourable opportunity for doing so presented itself.

“And whenever he did so, she never failed to make a report of the circumstance to Frank Leatheredge, who was in secret her sweetheart, and who was a decent young fellow of one-and-twenty, apprenticed to Wryneck and nearly out of his time. Of course, Frank couldn’t help being in love with Margaret, since she was not unwilling, but he had all through his apprenticeship been so bullied and badgered by Wryneck that he was almost as much afraid of him as though he were an ogre, and dare not for his very life let it be known to his master that he entertained feelings of affection for her. Though the house where Margaret lived was not a half-mile distant, and she frequently came to the warehouse, he took care never to be caught, when old Wryneck was present, looking at or speaking to her with any other than a respectful and deferential manner. But love-letters passed between them. There was an old woman who lived in Blue Anchor Alley and who was reputed to be a fortune-teller, and it was to her the letters were entrusted, ‘till called for,’ by one party or the other. As you need not be told, the young fellow treasured those precious little *billet doux* of his lady love, and had, perhaps, a dozen of them, and his great delight was to steal a quarter of an hour while he was employed down in the great cellar where the stock was kept, and where the delicious correspondence was concealed, and read them through, from the very first one, by the light of the cellar lantern. One afternoon, expecting a letter, he had slipped round to Blue

Anchor Alley and secured it. But whether it was accidental, or Peter Wryneck had any suspicion, is unknown, but as soon as Frank returned his master bade him take off his coat as there was a job for him that would be best done in his shirt-sleeves. He was in the counting-house when he got this order.

“‘I’ll just run up-stairs with my coat, sir,’ said young Leatheredge.

“‘There’s no occasion for that,’ remarked old Wryneck, all the time keeping a sharp eye on him, as though to see that he did not take anything out of the coat-pockets; ‘leave it here till you have done what is wanted down-stairs.’ So Frank hung up the coat with Margaret’s letter in the breast-pocket.

“There can be but little doubt, from what afterwards transpired, that the mean rascal got hold of the letter and read it, and since, as I have already told you, up to this time he had not the slightest idea of what was going on, you may depend on it he was mad about it; or, if not actually mad, not many removes from it, or he could never have conceived such a diabolical revenge. It may have been that it was the only weapon lying handy, but what, having read the letter, he caught up was a heavy beechwood mallet used for breaking soda, and with this in his hand he crept softly down the cellar-stairs.

“He couldn’t see Frank at first, but presently he made him out at the far end of the cellar, kneeling down and reading something by the light of the lantern, and he crept up to him, quiet as a cat, to find out what it was, and the young fellow was so

absorbed in what he was perusing that he did not hear him. Wryneck got close without his presence being suspected, and, standing in the dark, could look over Frank Leatheredge's shoulder, and at once he discovered that the letter he was reading was in Margaret's handwriting, and that in a hole made by taking a brick from the cellar wall there was a packet of a dozen or so.

"He may not have meditated murder when he armed himself with the mallet, but nothing was too bad for him then, and down came the soda-crusher on Frank Leatheredge's uncovered head with a force that felled him to the ground, without a cry or a groan even.

"Of course, I can give you no explanation of what old Wryneck's feelings were when he saw the effects of his terrific blow.

"He could have no doubt that Frank was dead.

"Where his head lay there was a pool of blood, and his face was pallid, and, thrusting his hand in at the bosom of the young man's waistcoat, he could make out no other than that his heart had ceased to beat.

"It was a horrible predicament.

"He dare not call in any assistance, for that would be to proclaim himself a murderer. If he could conceal the body for a few hours, so as to give himself time, he might invent some scheme to conceal the crime, or, at all events, account for it in some other way than acknowledge himself as the perpetrator.

"There was a sort of pit close to where the inanimate body was lying, a hole in the ground that

at one time had been used for storing potatoes, but it was long since it had been used for that purpose, and was made useful to contain the sweepings of the cellar until such time as the scavengers came and emptied it.

"It was three-parts full of rubbish now, and jumping into it and clawing it out by armfuls, Wryneck soon made a space for the body, which he rolled in, and then piled the rubbish on top.

"Then he sopped up the blood with sawdust, and, taking all the letters, went up-stairs to the warehouse, taking care, you may be sure, to lock the cellar door.

"But Frank Leatheredge was not dead.

"For the immediate purposes of my story, and as far as old Wryneck was aware, he was. But, actually, he was not. It was only the extraordinary thickness of his skull saved him. He was so completely stunned, however, that it was many hours before he began to recover consciousness. Gradually, having pushed off the light litter of sawdust and straw that covered him, he sat up and his senses returned to him, and he remembered all that had happened. But he was afraid to make any noise. He was always a meek-spirited young fellow, and that terrific crack on his cranium, to say nothing about the blood he had lost, had left him without twopenn'orth of pluck, as the saying is, and his foremost fear was that should Wryneck presently come down into the cellar again and find he was not dead he would not scruple to set about finishing him effectually. He had no idea of how long he had been lying in the rubbish-

pit, but while, with his head racked with pain, he was wondering what he had best do, he heard the key grating in the cellar lock, and knowing it could be no other than Wryneck, he made haste to huddle down in the hole again, and pull the litter over him.

"It was, indeed, the conscience-stricken chandler.

"He had as yet been unable to think of any plan, and it was now time for him to shut up the warehouse, and go home, and he was anxious to see that the body was all right before he did so. Frank could hear him with halting and unsteady feet descending the cellar-stairs and coming towards the hole, and he lay under the rubbish still and rigid. It was several seconds before Wryneck could muster courage to approach the spot where the murdered man was hidden. He did at last, however, and even nerved himself to put his hand in among the straw and rubbish at the feet end of the corpse, and, hooking a finger in at the bottom hem of his trousers, raised the leg a few inches. 'Dead enough! Dead enough!' he murmured, with a groan, as Frank allowed his leg to be raised and then dropped as though it had no more life in it than a wooden one. 'How could I doubt it?' And then, all the time groaning and muttering, he departed with the lantern, and young Leatheredge heard the cellar door locked again.

"He did not know what to do. The damage done to his head had sent his wits wool-gathering, and he could not make up his mind as to the best course to adopt under the circumstances. At last he be-thought him of the old fortune-teller, or witch, as she was sometimes called, in Blue Anchor Alley. She

was a party to be trusted, and she already knew something about the secret correspondence between his dear Margaret and himself. True, the cellar-door was locked, but there was at the back of the premises a small wooden trap opening into the street for convenience of shooting coals, and secured on the inner side with a strong bolt. It would be easy for him to squeeze his body through this aperture, and, it being dark, no one would see him doing it.

“So, in his shirt-sleeves as he was, and quite forgetting how awfully his face was stained and his hair all matted, he made his way out, and ran through the back streets to Blue Anchor Alley, to the little house where the witch lived. It was not very late—not much past ten o’clock—but she had already gone to bed, and hearing him cautiously tapping at the parlour window, she opened the bed-room casement above and looked down, just as, hearing the sound, he turned up his face to speak to her. She was a strong-minded woman, as the nature of her business demanded she should be, but the spectacle that met her view was so dreadful that she was about to utter a shriek, when he addressed her by name and told her who he was, and begged her to come down instantly and let him in.

“So she came down and let him into the parlour, when he was so faint and exhausted that he sank on a chair, and it was not until he had swallowed a glass of rum, of which she happened to have some in the house, that he could explain to her what had occurred, and begged her to advise him what to do. ‘First of all,’ replied Mrs. Pitchwick—that I remember was the witch’s name—‘you had best have something to

eat and drink to get back a little of your lost strength.' So she gave him some meat and bread and a drop more rum—in water this time—and while he was eating she sat a-thinking. When he had done—and it was fortunate that his injuries had no very bad effect on his appetite—he asked her to get him some water to wash his head and face with. But to his astonishment, Mrs. Pitchwick chucklingly replied, 'There will be time enough for that to-morrow, or, p'r'aps, next day.'

"Young Leatheredge, who could see himself in the looking-glass over the witch's mantelshelf, exclaimed that it was ridiculous to talk so, since it would be impossible for him to go about in such a hideous plight.

"'So it would be, my dear,' replied Mrs. Pitchwick, 'if you intended to go about ; but you don't.'

"'Don't I? Then what are my intentions?' asked Frank, staring at her.

"'You are going back to where you came from,' said the witch quite seriously, 'back to the hole where he buried you.'

"Frank Leatheredge looked at her harder than ever. It gave him a chill all down his back as he did so. From the old woman's words it seemed as though she regarded him, not as a living mortal, but as a sanguinary apparition. It seemed as though she read his thoughts, for she presently laughingly remarked—

"'Don't you mind being a trifle blood-smeared for a few hours, deary ; we will make him bleed in another fashion, the old hunks ! I hate him. It was he and

another who put the constables on to me last time! Listen to me, Master Leatheredge, and I will tell you of a pretty little plan I have been hatching while you were eating your supper.'

"It was to this effect:—He was to go back and get into the premises in the same way as he had got out. So that he might not be noticed going through the streets, she would lend him a heavy, warm cloak she herself wore, and this would serve to cover him through the night. She would further provide him besides with a drop of something comforting in a small bottle, and he was to make the best of it, all unwashed as he was. But what she particularly impressed on him was, that he was to be sure and get into the litter-hole again—of course, without the cloak, which he could stow away somewhere, before Wryneck came in the morning to open the warehouse. 'Do that,' said she, 'and leave all the rest to me.'

"Young Leatheredge, who listened attentively, did not like the scheme. It was hardly feasible that he would. There was a lot of danger in it, and what was to be gained by it? That was what he wanted to know. The witch declined to promise precisely what might be gained, but she gave him her word that if he left the matter in her hands, and followed her instructions exactly and without flinching, his being left for murdered by Wryneck would be the most fortunate thing that ever happened to him. As for the danger, she declared there was none at all, since it was not at all likely his master would return to the warehouse until his usual time the next morning, and she would take care to be his first customer.

“‘But how will that help me?’ young Leatheredge asked her.

“‘Leave it to me and you will see,’ replied Mrs. Pitchwick. ‘You are quite sure,’ says she, ‘it was the soda-mallet he struck you with?’

“‘Quite sure.’

“She took her crutch-stick out of the corner. ‘Do you think,’ said she, ‘that if I was to knock so’—and she knocked—‘on the warehouse floor that you could hear me in the cellar beneath?’

“‘I am sure I could if you was standing by the counter when you knocked, because that is just over the litter-hole.’

“‘Very well, then. Now go back and act prudently; and when you hear three knocks you may know that there is a friend at hand.’

“Of course, you will understand,” continued Peter Scruppitt, while the parlour customers at the Nine Nutmegs sat, one and all, with their mouths ajar listening, “of course, you will understand that the young man did not regard Mrs. Pitchwick as an ordinary woman. By no means. Both Margaret and himself had a far higher opinion of her. By a curious coincidence, they had gone, unknown to each other, to this old fortune-teller, and she had confidently predicted that, in spite of all obstacles, they would eventually be married. So Frank Leatheredge screwed up his courage to follow the old woman’s strange instructions. He went back, and, raising the little wooden trap-cover, got into the cellar, bolting the trap inside, and there he remained, wrapped in the witch’s cloak and lying on the litter till he heard the church

clock strike seven, and he knew that Wryneck would arrive in half an hour. Then he took off the cloak and hid it, and buried himself in the litter-hole, face downwards, just as he lay when Wryneck laid him there as a dead body.

"Mrs. Pitchwick must have been lurking in the neighbourhood and watching for his coming, for no sooner had Wryneck taken the shutters down than in she walked and asked for three pounds of soda. She hadn't been in Wryneck's shop since he had caused information to be laid against her as a fortune-teller, and with such an awful load on his mind he wasn't glad to see her now, and growlingly asked her if there wasn't a shop nearer her own abode she could have favoured with her custom? 'For anything else beside soda there is,' replied Mrs. Pitchwick, 'but there is no soda like yours to be got anywhere. I could swear to it by the smell,' says she, holding what the chandler had served her with up to her nose. But the same moment she drew back her face all of a sudden, and, looking at Wryneck, says she—

"'Why, what have you been doing to it?'

"'Doing to it, you old hag? What do you mean?'

"'I mean,' says she, fixing her beady eyes on him, 'that it's got a different smell than usual. *It smells of blood!*'

"Wryneck thought of the weapon with which he struck down young Leatheredge, and turned white as a sheet. But he tried nevertheless to keep his countenance as he made answer—

"'A rare keen nose you must have. You have

grown silly in your old age, I think. How can soda smell of blood?’

“‘I don’t know!’ she replied, sniffing round. ‘P’raps it isn’t the soda; but there is blood somewhere, that I can swear.’

“Peter Wryneck, in fear and rage, sprang at her, and laid his hands on her shoulders to push her out.

“‘Don’t touch me!’ exclaimed the witch, raising her voice. ‘Dare to do it, and I will scream loud enough to wake the dead!’

“He trembled so on hearing her say those words that he could scarce stand.

“‘You infernal old beldame,’ he exclaimed, ‘do you know what you are talking about?’

“‘Now you have given me my proper name,’ says she, grinning at him, ‘we can talk plainly to each other. It is being a beldame that gives me the power to know what it is that you have got hidden in your cellar at this moment. Was I ever there in my life?’

“‘Never,’ he answered, quaking.

“‘Then how do I know,’ said the witch, ‘that in the left-hand corner, at the far end, there is a litter-hole, and that under the litter there is lying your young shopman murdered and stiff and stark? How do I know,’ says she, stalking up to the soda-barrel and taking up the heavy mallet that was resting there, ‘that this is what he was murdered with, and that you, Peter Wryneck, are the murderer?’

“It was not a bad idea that of Mrs. Pitchwick’s, the taking in hand the soda-mallet. In his despairing fury he might have assaulted her else.

"But she was a tough old woman and grimly defiant, and with the weapon in her bony grip, and with her beldame power, as Peter Wryneck thought, flashing in her eyes, he was completely cowed, and his terror shaking him down on to his knees, he clasped his hands and implored her to have mercy on him and keep his dreadful secret.

"But she shook her head.

"‘Listen to me,’ said Wryneck; ‘you are a poor woman. You would get nothing by betraying me.’

"‘I should get as much as you got by murdering Frank Leatheredge,’ says she. ‘I should get revenge. I owe you a grudge, remember!’

"‘Yes, yes, I know,’ he exclaimed beseechingly, ‘but this is no time to talk of grudges. Listen! I have fifty pounds in a bag in my counting-house. Will it buy your silence?’

"‘I must see the body before I give you an answer,’ says she. ‘Come down with me and let me have a peep at it;’ and as though by way of insisting on her demand, she tapped three times on the floor with her crutch-stick.

"He would rather not have gone, but he dare not deny her. So, slipping the bolt of the shop door, he lit the lantern—the cellar was always dark—and down they went together. He was afraid to go first, so she took the light and went straight to the litter-hole and pulled off the rubbish, and there lay the body, face downward, and with the hair matted and the shirt crimsoned—an awful spectacle.

"Peter Wryneck was so overcome that he covered his eyes with his hands, and shuddering cried—

“‘What—what would I give to bring him back to life again!’

“‘Aye, aye! What would you give?’ said the witch. ‘A thousand pounds, maybe!’

“‘Willingly, willingly,’ he replied; ‘but to a guilty wretch such as I it is as bad almost as murder itself to speak of raising the dead.’

“‘Peter Wryneck,’ said the witch, laying a hand on his shoulder, ‘I have already given you a taste of my power. What amends will you make him if, by my magic art, I can restore him to life? As for myself, I will be satisfied with the fifty pounds you have already promised me. But what will you give him?’

“‘I might safely promise you all that I have in the world, well knowing that what you suggest is impossible,’ Wryneck replied impatiently. ‘Why do you mock me?’

“‘If it is impossible, you run no risk in making a bargain,’ said the witch. ‘You are old and rich. If I can bring him to life again, will you retire and give him your business?’

“‘I swear to you that I will do it,’ replied Peter Wryneck eagerly.

“‘But I must have something more binding than your empty oath. We will go up-stairs, and you shall put your promise in writing and sign it. I will witness it, and then we will see what can be done.’

“And, bewildered with terror and encouraged by her show of witchcraft to hope that she was capable of still greater miracles, they went up-stairs to the counting-house, and there he wrote out a conditional

agreement, and signed it, and Mrs. Pitchwick witnessed it.

“‘Now,’ said she, putting it into her bosom, ‘you stay up here and let me go down and have him to myself for a time. But give me first some oil, and some best wine, and some vinegar, the strongest you have, and, meanwhile, have his bed-room made ready with a warm bath and a good fire in it.’

“And, still trembling with hope and fear, Wryneck did what was asked of him, and the charwoman coming in shortly afterwards, he set her to prepare the bed-room. As to the ceremony that was performed down in the cellar with the oil, the vinegar, and the wine, I leave you to guess, but, if you ask me, I should think that the two first were thrown away, and that Mrs. Pitchwick and Frank Leatheredge drank the wine between them.

“Anyhow, after about an hour the witch went up, and triumphantly bade Wryneck come and see how well she had done her work. And he went down, and when he saw young Leatheredge sitting up on the straw and asking where he was and how he came there, in a confused and dazed sort of way, he could have fallen on Mrs. Pitchwick’s neck—for all that he suspected that she was full of the devil—and hugged her with delight. He shook hands tenderly with Frank, and admitted that he had yesterday, in a fit of passion, given him a knock on the head, and that he had lain insensible ever since, and, in the fulness of his joy, he likewise informed him of the handsome reparation he intended to make him for the injury he had inflicted on him.

"And so," said Dr. Scrumpitt, bringing his lengthy yarn to a conclusion, "they led him up-stairs, and with Mrs. Pitchwick to nurse him, he was quite well in a week, and a month afterwards his name, instead of that of Shoveller and Wryneck, appeared painted over the shop door ; and nine months after Frank Leatheredge married Margaret, and old Wryneck retired and went and ended his days at Dover. And now, gentlemen, you know all about it."

"Except one thing," remarked the inquisitive little haberdasher. "I *should* like to be informed how *you* came to know all about it. It must have been a very close secret."

Turning sternly on the haberdasher, said Dr. Scrumpitt, "When a secret is revealed, sir, by one person to another, under a sacred promise made by the one it is revealed to that he will never divulge the name of the revealer, you will admit, I think, that a man may be excused from perjuring himself merely for the purpose of gratifying any individual's idle curiosity."

And having administered this deserved rebuke to the haberdasher, and which everybody present endorsed with "Hear, hear," Dr. Scrumpitt put on his hat and bade the company "Good night."

A ROMANCE OF COSTERDOM.

HAD it been summer time there would have been nothing remarkable in the circumstance of two excursionists from London making an appearance at the bar of that exceedingly rural little roadside inn, the Fox and Drake, within a mile of Chigwell, and requesting the favour of rumpsteak and onions for two being got ready as soon as possible. But, being in the middle of bleak January, with a nine-inch depth of snow levelling path and roadway ; with snow high piled in the horse-trough, like a measure of beer with a fine "cauliflower" head, and with icicles a foot long inhospitably festooning the hanging sign-board, it was scarcely to be wondered at if the landlady opened her eyes a bit wider than usual when the pair of holiday-makers, with frosty rime in their whiskers, and their noses blue with cold, came in, and gave their order as above mentioned.

It was unmistakable, from their dress, that they were "out for the day," as the saying is. Though respectably and warmly clad, that they were of the London costermonger class was denoted by the profusion of pearl buttons on their jackets, by their caps

with ear-lappets and composed of some hairy material, and by their neck-wraps, which were of the true barrowman "bird's-eye" pattern, bulkily enveloping their throats. Business, however, was not so brisk in dead of winter time at the Fox and Drake that such an order should be declined because its execution was not quite convenient, necessitating, as it did, a flying visit to the village butcher, who resided a quarter of a mile distant, and in good time, while the two sat over a pot of ale in the snug little parlour, a promising fragrance proceeded from the kitchen.

But they were a strange couple. That they were friends and intimates was fairly presumable, yet, had any one walked behind them from the railway station to the inn—and the distance was at least a mile and a half—he would not have heard them exchange as many as a dozen remarks. There was, seemingly, a mystery between them, mainly in the keeping of the older man. He was probably five-and-twenty years the senior of the other, though still apparently hale and hearty, and it was plain from his silence, and from his so frequently feeling his whiskers in a meditative manner, that his mind was ill at ease. It was the younger man, who was a good-looking, straight-backed fellow, who made all the advances towards conversation, and who looked more and more puzzled when each and every attempt was nipped in the bud by his companion. It was but natural to expect, if there was anything of importance to discuss between them, that the time for making a start with it was when the ale and the tobacco was brought in, and the maid had stirred the newly-made fire to a cheerful flame before she left the

room, closing the door after her. Indeed, after filling his pipe and lighting it, and filling a glass and partially emptying it, the younger man, composing himself comfortably in his chair, remarked cheerily—

“Now, Joey Budge, what is it?”

But the other, filling his glass and merely sipping it, made answer in low-spirited tones and with something like a sigh—

“Not yet, Dick. Not till we’ve had our peck. I shall feel more ekal to it then, lad.”

So no more was said until the steak and onions were brought in, smoking hot and smelling delicious in the nipping air.

And while they are discussing that satisfying repast, being in a position to do so—thanks to Dick Dollop, who afterwards narrated to me the strange particulars—I will enlighten the reader as to how matters stood between the two men, or, I should rather have said, were supposed to stand.

To begin with, the individual claiming the inelegant appellation above mentioned, was not so named at all. To the best of his knowledge his baptismal cognomen was Richard Adolphus Fitzwilliam. He was the only son of his father, who in his time had figured as a person of some importance on the Stock Exchange. A man of wealth, he married, when he was well advanced in years, a young woman whose face was her fortune, and who was clever, and, as will presently appear, not over scrupulous. Richard Adolphus was born to them, and although the husband and wife, as was rumoured, did not lead the happiest of lives together, matters went smoothly—in business, at all

events, with the stockbroker—until, caught in the whirl of mad speculation, he found himself utterly and completely ruined and bankrupt, and being an old man and unable to stand against such an overwhelming reverse of fortune, the undertaker was called in to perform his funeral obsequies while the auctioneer's men were yet busy in arranging the household furniture into convenient lots.

What became of the Widow Fitzwilliam no one seems to be exactly aware. With no means to speak of, she appears to have vanished entirely soon after the death of her ruined husband, and that without troubling herself as to what was to become of Richard Adolphus, at that time about twelve years old. Probably she was not fond of him. And, to tell the truth, he certainly was a lad of most peculiar habits and instincts, considering his father's high social position. Sturdy and strong, and by no means lacking intelligence, his proclivities were so appallingly vulgar that all who knew him were shocked and disgusted. His father had placed him in the most genteel schools, but all the endeavours that were made to educate and refine him were fruitless. He openly defied the masters, and challenged head monitors to single combat. He scaled the school wall, having on his superfine Sunday suit at the time, and was discovered five days afterwards, wearing corduroy trousers and some one else's jacket, and assisting in the manufacture of clothes-pegs in a gipsy encampment at Finchley. He would frequently play truant, and on such occasions was generally to be found at the Cattle Market, up to his eyes in mud and delight, among

the oxen or horses. It seemed rather a relief than otherwise to Master Fitzwilliam when he found himself an orphan and destitute. He disposed of his cricket-bats, and his fishing-tackle, and his other expensive playthings, and bought a suit of clothes becoming his altered station, and went cheerfully to work for five shillings a week as a wood-chopper, abandoning his highly respectable surname, and mutilating the second that was given to him at the christening font, making it "Dollop" instead of Adolphus, and as Dick Dollop he was known ever after. And Dick Dollop, with amazing perseverance and energy, had made his way in the world, so that, at the age of twenty-five, he was as prosperous a costermonger as Kentish Town could boast of, with money in the bank and horses and carts and barrows of his own.

Dick was acquainted with the Budges, though he did not live in the same neighbourhood with them. For old Mr. Budge he had great respect and admiration, likewise for his daughter Polly. But if there was any one he despised and detested more than another, it was Budge's son Bill. A lazy, unprincipled lout, too dandified in his ideas to assist his father either in the shop or stable, or in going the daily "rounds" with fruit and green-grocery—a useless poor weed of a fellow, with a hankering for "flash" clothes and for scarf-pins and finger-rings; and being not in the least particular what he did to gratify such little personal vanities, old Budge was made to suffer, and the more so as the amiable youth grew older and added a liking for cards and for backing racehorses

to his other vices. By his continual and cunningly-concocted pilferings, he gradually succeeded in ruining his parent's good business and bringing him so low, that, at the time when he accompanied Dick Dollop to Chigwell, old Budge found it not easy to make a living with his daughter Polly's help and with but one pony and barrow.

The rumpsteak and onions having been duly disposed of—scarcely a word having been spoken by either meanwhile—Dick suggested that they couldn't do better than "tot up" with a stiff glass of hot gin-and-water each; and that doubtful aid to digestion having been ordered in and supplied, he—Dick Dollop that is to say—again composed himself for attentive listening, and with increased emphasis repeated his former invitation—

"*Now* then, Joe Budge, if you feel comfortably wound up, fire away, my tulip, and get the mystery off your mind."

"I was just a-going to begin, Dick, when you spoke," replied the other, further fortifying himself with a pull at the steaming glass before him. "You was puzzled, and no wonder, at my behaviour last night, but you will understand it better when I have revealed what I've got to reveal. Very likely you thought at the time I'd been drinking. But I remember, and can tell you every word that was said atween us—every word, I mean, that led to us being here at this present moment. I needn't repeat the question you put to me, when, after passing a pleasant evening together at the Bell and Muffin, we stood at the corner of the street together, having a few parting

words. 'For Lor' A'mighty's sake,' I says, in answer to that question of yours, 'never again ask me such a thing.'

"'Why not?'" says you.

"'I can't explain it here,' I says, 'nor anywhere else that is within earshot of anybody who might be listening. Come along with me to-morrow,' I says, 'to that snug little country public near Chigwell we went to last autumn, and there we can talk free and without danger of being overheard or disturbed, and I'll make known to you what I've long wanted to.'"

"I give you my word, Joe Budge, I was never more surprised in all my life," returned Dick Dollop, with an earnestness that attested the truth of the assertion. "'Why, what's come over him?'" I says to myself, when you turned away so quick and sudden and without saying 'Good night,' and I lay awake saying it a score of times afterwards. 'Why couldn't he give me a straightfor'ard answer to my upright question, without asking me to go a gallowantin' with him into the country, such lovely weather as this is to do it in?' 'Yes,' or 'No,' would have been enough, Joe," continued the young fellow, with some pride in his tone. "When I said to you last night, 'Before we part, Joe Budge, I'll give you a question to sleep on. Do you know of any reason why your Polly and me shouldn't make a match of it?' if you had made answer, 'I do know a reason why, and, to my thinking, it is a sufficient reason, though I don't choose to explain it,' it would have been all over, and you nor Polly would ever have heard the subject broached again by me. I'd have put my own constructions on

your objections, Joe Budge, and I would have swallowed them. And I would have kep' 'em down, too, though it might have been a hard job to do it."

"Would you mind mentioning, Dick," remarked Mr. Budge, after a considerable pause, "what that construction of yours might have been?"

"Free and plain, I'll mention it," returned the other frankly. "I should have set it down that, having turned it over in your mind, you had come to the conclusion that I was not the sort of chap that would suit you for a son-in-law."

"As how?"

"In this way. 'He never was born to the business he took to and is now follerin',' says you. 'He was born in what might be called a genteel spear, and his shying at it and taking to a spear what was ungenteel, was unnat'ral, and not to be easy accounted for; therefore,' says you, 'it might happen that if he made money he might change his mind again about his spear, and sneak back to the stuck-up and toffish, and look down on his wife if she stuck true to the old stock she come of and wouldn't follow his lead.' I don't say that you have got such a poor opinion of me, Joe Budge, but I do say this, that if it was your honest conviction that at any time I might chuck off my adopted breed and go back to the original 'un, you would be quite right in giving me 'No' for an answer."

"I'll only ask you one more question, Dick—Is all what you've just now been saying your own ideas, or have you been helped by somebody else to them?"

"Not to deceive you, old man, if they are my own

ideas Polly shares in them. Not," Dick Dollop hastened to add, "not that you are to think that there has been love-making atween us and we have been having a palaver about particklers. That hain't my way of going about matters. 'Lay your foundations first, and set about building your house arterwards,' is *my* motter, and, following it, my intention was to get your consent first and start fair and square with the courtship arterwards. And, when I said that it was Polly's opinion that it was best for low born to mate with low born, it wasn't give me an answer to any plump and plain question of mine, but got out of her artful like, in the way of or'nary conversation. And after all that, which is only wasting time, and hain't nothing to the purpose which brought us down here, once more, Joe Budge, what have you got to tell me?"

"I've got a story to tell you, my lad," returned Mr. Budge quietly, "about as rum a one as ever you read in a story-book."

Dick Dollop stared hard at his companion for a second or two, and then laughed outright.

"D'ye mean to tell me," said he, "that, after all, *that's* the sort of milk in the coker-nut we're come eight miles on a frosty day to crack. You are going to tell me a story-book story! Oh, all right; what's the name of it? 'Ole Mother 'Ubbard?'"

"I didn't say I was going to tell you a story-book story, but one that, p'r'aps, may sound like it," returned Budge seriously. "Just you sit and smoke your pipe, and don't say a word till I come to the end of it."

"When I was a young man, same as you are now, I knew a chap who worked for his uncle, who was a general dealer, and did a bit in the horse buying and selling way, and his nevvie worked for him for eighteen shillings a-week. Something to do with horses took them down to Colchester, and there, at the fair, this young chap I'm speaking of, he sees a young woman and falls, in a manner of speaking, head over heels in love with her. Up to that time he had been a harum-scarum young fellow, spending his bit of wages as fast as he took 'em, and very often faster, and had no more thought about getting married than he had of going up in a balloon. Besides, if he had," says you, "eighteen shillings a week was a rare lot to get married on."

"He ought," remarked Dick Dollop, thus appealed to, "to have had his foolish head punched for thinking about such a thing."

A comical expression for a moment came into Mr. Budge's eyes, but he presently continued—

"Howsomever, he was a smart sort of a chap to look at, and though the horse buying business that took them to Colchester was all done in a week, him and the young woman I've already mentioned, and who lived along with her old mother, made a match of it, and when he came back to London he put the banns up, and somehow scrambled the money together, and she came to London with her mother, and they got married, and in the nat'ral course of ewents a young 'un—a boy he was—come to town. It was a very hard winter at the time, and things went crooked with the young fellow. He quarrelled with his uncle,

and having no money to start for himself, his only means of living was picking up a shilling here and there in the markets; and besides his wife he had to purvide for his wife's mother, who wasn't able to do anything by way of help.

"Well, their young 'un wasn't more than a month old when they—the woman, I mean—see an advertisement in the newspaper. A lady, it said, wanted a healthy young mother, who had lost her own child, to take a baby and nurse it, she being herself unequal to find it nat'ral nourishment, and that being a harticle that the young woman I'm speaking of had plenty of, she and her mother, who was a manoeovering old creeter, made it up between them to go and see the lady about it, not saying a word to the husband. So they go and they find the lady, who lived in a swell house in one of the squares, and they see the lady's child, a miserable, skinny little thing, that looked as though it didn't have a ha'porth of life in it. But it was a first child, and the mother was awfully anxious about it, and afraid lest it should die. The father, she said, was fonder of it, if it was possible, than she was, and would willingly pay any money to save its life, which was only to be done, the doctor said, by finding a foster-mother for it who would give it all her time and attention, and be as careful of it as if it was her own. Another thing the doctor said, was, that whoever took the baby, the nuss must live in the country, on account of the fresh air. And when the lady came to hear that the young woman who had come after the job lived in Somers Town, she said it was no use talking about the

business any longer. Everything else was all satisfactory. The young woman's artful old mother had dressed her up in a black bonnet, and put a bit of crape on her dress just as though she was in mourning, and the pair of 'em made out that the young woman's own baby hadn't been dead more than a week, so that was all right. Not living in the country was the only objection, and this the old woman got over by saying that if it was made worth her while her daughter might be brought to agree to go and live along with her at Colchester, which was her native place, while her husband kept in his situation in London. To this the lady said that money was of no consideration, and to make it worth while to all parties, she offered five pounds a month for the nussing. But of course, they said, they couldn't settle it without first consulting with the husband.

"So they go home and tells him all about it—leaving out the crammer they had told the lady about their own young 'un being dead. The black bonnet was shoved away and the crape took off the gownd before he had a chance of seeing them. There'd ha' been a thundering row if they'd told him the truth, and no mistake. You wouldn't have caught him winking at such a act of wickedness, poor as he was ; no !" and Mr. Budge smote the table with unnecessary force for one who is merely telling a story, "not for five hundred pounds. He was too fond of his young 'un for that. I give you my word for that, Dick Dollop," and he clapped that rebel against respectability on the shoulder. "I knowed that man, Dick, as well as if he was my own brother, and I'd answer

for it with my life that he wouldn't have done such a mean thing."

"P'r'aps," remarked the not-deeply interested Dick, "he was a religious cove, and would have been afraid of a judgment falling on him."

"A man may not be religious," returned Mr. Budge impressively, "but still he may believe in judgments. He mayn't at first, but when he's fairly collared by 'em he can't help it. Well, as I was saying, the wife and her mother they go home and they tell the husband of the stroke of business they've been doing, and it can't be said that he was exactly sorry for it. He didn't like the idea of his own kid being put on half rations so that a strange kid might get the benefit of it, and nat'rally he didn't relish his wife going in the country to live away from him. But his one objection they got over by saying that it wouldn't make the least difference to their own baby if the mother had as much as she wanted of wittles and drink, as she'd be able to with five pounds a month to handle, and, as for the other objection, they pointed out to him that Colchester wasn't as fur away as the other end of the world, and that he could easily run down now and then and see 'em. To tell you the truth, Dick—for the chap confessed as much to me himself—he didn't so much want to be convinced that, all round, it was a good thing as to find excuse enough for doing it. As I've told you, he was out of work, or next door to it, and the five pounds a month was a temptation, and the end of it was that he consented, and they went into the country."

"There hain't much bloodshed or willainy in the

story as yet," remarked Mr. Dollop, thinly disguising an inclination to gape. "You'll be coming to that presently, I suppose?"

"The willainy comes next. They hadn't been away more'n a few weeks when the lady's young 'un was took bad. She had not been to see it all the time it was away, but she was always writing letters about it, and begging and praying that it might be took good care of in a way that made it seem that its life was really precious to her, and she was awful fond of it. When they sent to her to say that the doctor had told 'em that it might die any time, she wrote back in a mighty hurry to say that she was coming. 'Course they took care that the baby what was supposed to be dead was stowed out of the way when she came. When she see how ill her child was, she was in a dreadful way. But it wasn't on the young 'un's account after all. She told the two women—the young 'un and the old 'un—that she was going to place confidence in them, and that she would pay them handsome if they would help her. The fact was, she said, she was not living on good terms with her husband. He was jealous of her, but they had been more reconciled since the child was born, but it was only on the child's account, and that if it died she felt sure that her husband would leave her and go abroad. The way she wanted them to help her was this: they were to try and get another child—buy it or steal it, she didn't care, so that it could be somehow got—it was to be a healthy child, a boy, and of the same age, and something of the same complexion as her own, so that she might pass it off on him and make him believe

it was strong and thriving. 'But if it can be done at all,' says she, 'it must be done quickly, for I got a letter from him only yesterday, saying that he is coming home from France next week, and that his sole reason for coming is that he may see his dear little son, who he is always thinking about, and very likely he would want to take it away and put it with a nurse of his own choosing.'

"Now we're coming to the willainy, Dick.

"It couldn't have happened patter not if they had planned it from the first and Old Nick had helped 'em. The child of the young woman who was doing the nussing, and who was supposed by the lady to be dead, was just the same age and of similar complexion, and he had the same coloured hair and eyes, but it was fat and hearty, and the other was pining and skinny. 'Course they daren't say a word about that child; but the old woman, who was a bad 'un at heart and a gripper for money, she asked the lady how much would she give down for a suitable young 'un.

"The lady said that she had a hundred pounds saved up and put by, and that, besides that, she would pay a pound a week always and ever after as long as the secret was kept.

"'Give me three days,' ses the old woman, 'and I will see what can be done.'

"Never a word, mind ye," continued Mr. Budge, with growing excitement, "to the husband, who all this time was in London looking after work he couldn't get, and who had made up his mind not to touch any of that five pound a month, and, therefore,

he couldn't go and see his wife at Colchester, not having the money to pay railway fare. The old woman, who was a wicked 'un, she talks her daughter over. 'Why not,' she says, 'let my little gran'son have this fine chance? He would be brought up a gentleman, and very likely have a fortune left him when his supposed father dies, and we shall have the hundred pounds down and a pound a-week besides, p'r'aps for years.' 'But Joe'—his name was Joe same as mine—'would never consent to such a thing,' says the young woman. 'Then don't ask him to,' says her mother. 'Keep it dark, and between ourselves. He can't care much for you or the child either,' she says, 'or he wouldn't let a couple of months go without coming to see you. Let him stay away as long as he likes, and when he chooses to come, show him the child that's left on our hands, and let him think that it is his. Men are not much better than fools in such matters. He will think that it has pined away through you having two of 'em to look after. You won't be troubled with it long,' says she, "'cordin' to what the doctor says, and all we shall have to do will be to bury it in the name of your own child, and the whole thing is done, snug and proper, and we have a hundred pounds to handle, and your young 'un is made a gentleman of, 'stead of growing up to be no better than his father is, and, on the quiet, you and me have as good as a pound a week coming in afterwards.'

"I don't say that the daughter was to be excused, but there was 'lowances to be made for her. She hadn't knowed her husband only a few weeks before

they were married, and p'r'aps she hadn't yet learnt to be as fond of him as she should have been; and then again, the mother was one of the carneying and persuading sort—I've talked along with her, and I know—and no doubt it was mostly her fault. Anyhow, the daughter consented, and they agreed between them to this swindle. When the lady came at the end of the three days there was just the kind of young' un she wanted to palm off to her husband as her own. They told her they had had to buy it, and that they would have only a few pounds left for their trouble when they had settled out of the promised hundred with the woman the child belonged to. And the lady paid down the hundred—all in gold, as had been agreed—and a little time after the husband he came in a carriage, and his wife with him, and he was mighty pleased to see how his sickly little brat had improved—as well he might be—and they took it away with them there and then—the husband making the two women a present of ten pounds.

“Then the old woman mixed up a bit more artfulness. There was no reason why they should stay any longer in the country, so she got the daughter to write to her husband to tell him that she had give up the nuss child and was coming home. Her mother's feelings, she said, would not allow her to keep it any longer, since their little boy, being only half fed, had wasted away so that he would hardly know it again when he saw it. And further, the letter said that the lady had such pity for her on account of her child, that she had made her a present

of twenty pounds, which would be useful to him to start in business."

Dick Dollop, whose interest in the story had gradually increased, here remarked—

"I think I can tell *you* what happened next, when he see what he took to be his own young 'un had been brought down to—he let his wife have it rather hot, 'specially for her thinking that he would start in business on what you might call the poor little kid's blood money!"

Mr. Budge changed colour hearing this, and his voice was huskier when he continued—

"Don't you be so quick at condemning, my lad. You wait and hear what the judgment was. That the chap we're a-speaking of was awful shocked when he see the half-starved-looking little creeter that was brought home to him, there can't be any doubt; but he didn't have any suspicions, don't you see, and he was got easy to forgive his wife when he had no reason for thinking other than what she had done was for the best. Yes. He took the twenty pounds, and he made a start with it, and, what's more, he did well. And the miserable little child, it didn't die, and the chap's wife she had another youngster, a gal this time, and she had no more after that. Meanwhile, there was a bit of money always coming reg'lar at Christmas—five-and-twenty pounds. The chap's wife told him that it was a reg'lar yearly present from the parents of the nuss child, because they was so grateful to her, but all the time the promised fifty was being paid, and the old woman

stuck hard and fast to her half, which the young 'un's conscience wouldn't let her do.

"I'm going at a gallop now, Dick, my boy, and hain't got much more to tell.

"After about four years the old woman died, and then all of a sudden the five-and-twenty pounds a year was increased to fifty, which, of course, was a very useful sum to look for'a'd to. And eight years after the chap's wife was took mortal ill, and before she died she made a clean breast of it. The Christmas before, the fifty pounds didn't come, and she confessed the reason of it was that the nuss child's father had gone all to ruin and died, and the wife had gone away nobody knowed where. Laying there a-dying, she begged and prayed her husband to forgive her, and never, if it could possibly be helped, let their daughter know of her mother's wickedness. She told him all about it as I've told you, giving him the tip who the people were that had their own boy, and where they used to live. And the chap I'm telling you about he hunted after that boy, and found him working at a wood-chopper's."

With lips white as the clay pipe he was smoking, the younger man rose at the table.

"Lord A'mighty!" he exclaimed. "Stop a bit, Joe Budge, and let a fellow get breath. Why, you found *me* at a wood-chopper's!"

"I did so, God forgive me, and you are my son Bill, and t'other whelp, who has been my ruin, is the false 'un. But it would kill Polly to let her know all about it. Promise me that you'll never do it, Bill."

"I'd deserve a judgment myself if I did such a cruel thing," Bill, with tears in his eyes, responded. "But a precious nice sort of old man *you* are, hain't you? But I'll keep it dark, don't you fear. Gi' me your hand, dad! Gi' me both of 'em!"

“UNCLE LOWTCH.”

WITH the hope of again meeting with Dr. Scrum-pitt, whose extraordinary story of “The Witch of Blue Anchor Alley” has already been given, I had resolved to look in again at the parlour of the Nine Nutmegs on the ensuing Saturday evening.

Circumstances, however, prevented me, and it was not until a fortnight after that I was enabled to fulfil my intention. But I lost nothing, as far as Dr. Scrum-pitt was concerned, by the delay. He had not himself been there since the occasion of my last visit, owing to an attack of lumbago that had kept him at home since Christmas, and which, no doubt, accounted for the tetchiness of his temper and for his pitching into the little haberdasher—figuratively speaking, of course—before he had been ten minutes in the room. Without the remotest attempt at sarcasm, or the least desire to be other than friendly and sympathetic, the haberdasher had respectfully inquired of the doctor what there was peculiar in his attack that his own famous invention and remedy, “Scrum-pitt’s Lumbago Plaister,” had failed to cure.

"I might as well inquire of you, sir," retorted the irascible doctor, "what there is peculiar in your constitution that the improving conversation of men of sense has no effect on the malady you are constantly afflicted with."

"But there you are mistaken," returned the haberdasher, who at all times was forgiving and conciliatory. "If I am not improved I am always much interested in anything that comes from you, sir, either in the way of conversation or story-telling. My remark was not intended to be offensive, and I should not have made it only at the moment I had it in my mind what a very remarkable family yours must be."

"I was not aware that mine is a remarkable family," returned the doctor irritably, "and I should be glad, sir, to know how you arrived at that conclusion."

"Well, I am willing to put it to the company generally," said the haberdasher mildly, "if I have not grounds for making the assertion on statements you yourself have made in this room. There was your grandfather, the soldier, who fought at Waterloo, and who lived, hearty and well for years afterwards with a bayonet in his back, the part that was outwardly projecting being fitted with a leather socket, because, the blade being lodged in a vital part, it would have been instant death for him to have had it extracted. Then there was your great aunt, down in Cornwall, who had hydrophobia through the bite of a cat, and who was entirely cured of the dreadful disease, except that, ever afterwards, she would eat no other animal food but mice of her own

catching. And, not to enumerate other marvellous instances, it was no longer since than the last time you were here that you thrilled us with an account of your uncle, who owed his success in life to his having been murdered. With every respect for you, Dr. Scruppitt, I must repeat my previous opinion, that yours is a very remarkable family, indeed."

"Am I to understand from that," asked Dr. Scruppitt, sternly, "that you question my veracity?"

"Certainly not, sir," returned the haberdasher with unmistakable earnestness, "I believe, as every other person present does, that you are incapable of stating that which is untrue, or even of exaggeration. I will go as far as to say, sir, that were you to relate to us—it is by no means likely, of course, but assuming, for argument sake, the possibility of such a thing—a story that was ten times more extraordinary than that concerning old Wryneck, the ships' provision dealer, and your uncle, we should be prepared to accept unhesitatingly your simple asseveration that it was true."

This may have been an artful stroke on the part of Mr. Trimmings to lure the doctor on. At all events, such seemed to be the opinion of the majority of those present, who covertly winked approval of his design. But it seemed as though their hopes, if they entertained any, were doomed to be nipped in the bud, for Dr. Scruppitt curtly, though in somewhat mollified tones, remarked—

"There is one thing you may accept unhesitatingly; that is, that all the stories you get out of me to-night won't impose a very heavy tax on your

belief. It is my intention to smoke a quiet pipe and be home early. At the same time, if any one insinuates the impossibility of my being able to relate a story even more extraordinary than any I have yet related in this room, I can tell him that, were I in the humour, I could very likely prove to him that he is mistaken."

"Pardon me," observed one of the company, "I think Mr. Trimmings said, or rather intended to say, that it was highly improbable that you knew any more stories of interest concerning any member of your own family, and for the *bona fides* of which you could personally vouch. But, of course, it can scarcely be expected that you would. It was thought by many of us, sir, that you must have exhausted the budget, if I may so express it, before you told us that capital tale about the witch and your respected relative."

Like all great men, Dr. Scrumpitt was not invulnerable to flattery. After a pause in the conversation, during which his glass was replenished, he presently remarked—

"Trimmings, I must apologize to you for anything I may have said to you that was uncalled for. Upon my word, though, I never looked at it in that light before. I am inclined to your opinion, that mine is an extraordinary family, and that a man might go a long way without finding a family, the members of which, taking them all round, could furnish more surprising instances of uncommon adventure or remarkable personal experience—females as well as males, and married as well as single. I can't say

whether she is alive or dead at the present time, but for cunning dodges and artfulness, I would venture to back the wife of a second cousin of mine. Though, for that matter, her husband was as bad as she was. He may not have started being as bad, but little Becky Mellish—that was her maiden name before she married Fred Cringle—soon taught him all that he didn't before know in the way of wickedness.

"Not but that his father's brother, who was their victim, was an awful old rip, and deserved almost all, if not quite, what happened to him. But perhaps that is a matter of opinion. He is dead now, and I have always been given to understand that he died penitent. I hope so. I have no doubt you will agree with me that if an individual is base enough to do his best to put a fellow-creature out of the world and deliberately takes measures for doing so to the very end, his guilt is much the same, whether he succeeds or not. But they were a confoundedly bad lot altogether, and we won't say any more about them. As I before remarked, I am going to smoke a quiet pipe."

But the parlour company were not disposed to let him off so easily, and the doctor, no doubt, would have been much disappointed had they done so. It was respectfully suggested to him, that though he might not feel inclined to narrate the whole of the strange story he had so tantalizingly hinted at, he might, at least, give them shortly the particulars as to the satanic part played against his relative by Mr. Cringle, and what the former had done that he,

Dr. Scrumpitt, should think that he deserved it. Obdurate at first, he presently relented.

"Hang it all, if you will have the story you must, I suppose," he remarked good-humouredly. "If you don't like it when I have done you won't be able to say that I pressed it on you.

"You must know, then, that this Fred Cringle was an idle rascal, without business or profession, with no other means of existence than about eighty pounds a-year allowed him by his uncle, who had made a lot of money by different speculations, most of them, no doubt, of a shady kind. It wasn't out of love for him that he allowed his nephew—whose own parents died when he was a boy—bare enough to buy him bread and cheese and keep a decent coat on his back, but on account of some little property he was concerned in with Cringle's father. Fred, who was six-and-twenty, had often tried to persuade his uncle to buy him out with a lump sum down. But, for some reason or other, that did not suit the old gentleman's book. 'It will be time enough to talk about that,' was always his answer, 'when you find some decent and industrious young woman fool enough to marry you, and who will have sense enough to prevent you squandering your income, which amounts to about thirty shillings a week, in folly and extravagance.'

"'I should like to know,' Fred would answer ruefully, 'what good-looking girl would link herself to a beggar such as I am?'

"'You have no right to expect such a thing,' replied his uncle. 'What the deuce do *you* want

with a good-looking wife? Take sensible advice and look out for some plain, homely creature who is not above helping to keep a joint of meat in the cupboard. Somebody,' he would add with a sneer, for he hated Fred for his dandified ways, 'who already has a business of her own, and which might be extended by the introduction of a little capital. The laundry trade, I am told, is a by no means unprofitable one, and you would be all right for cuffs and collars, and you have no idea how a few hours daily at the mangle would improve your muscular development.'

"Fred was discreet enough, when these pleasant interviews took place, to bottle up his wrath, or he might have given the old chap a stinger or two in reply. A pretty sort of one, for instance, he was to recommend anybody to marry a 'plain, homely creature.' Handsome or otherwise, he never had a wife of his own, but he was notoriously an awful old sinner as regarded the female kind, nevertheless. It was his most conspicuous weakness, and the more reprehensible, because it was chiefly among the young women of the working class that he sought his victims, and a pretty score of curses he must have had recorded against him to answer for when his reckoning time came. Not that his shameful 'conquests,' as he used to call them, were aided by his good looks or manly bearing. He was, I have been told, about as insignificant-looking a fellow as you would meet with in a day's march. An ungainly-built old chap, with a hobbling gait caused by bunions, and round-shouldered and thick-lipped, and with something wrong with his

eyes, so that he could not venture out-of-doors without wearing a pair of blue spectacles. But, as I have already told you, he had plenty of money, and on the special species of iniquity in question he could be free-handed with it. Otherwise, he was as close-fisted as a miser. When it came to squaring-up with his nephew, for the year's account between them there were some odd halfpence to receive on the six pounds ten a month—fourpence ha'penny I think the amount was—and there was always the coppers ready, or, if he didn't happen to have them by him, Fred had to hand over three ha'pence before the other would trust him with a sixpence. So you may guess what condition the nephew was in to get married.

"But, as I have no doubt, gentlemen, you all are aware, and may perhaps have seen some examples in your own family, want of means does not always make a man, or a woman either, discreet. Fred fell in love with a sweet pretty face that was the property of a young lady who was forewoman at a millinery establishment in Oxford-street, and, the affection being mutual, like the fly in the old song, who was tempted by a pot of treacle, 'without considering consequences' in they went for matrimony. It was ridiculously rash on the young man's part, no doubt, but credit must at least be given him for being candid. When he proposed to Becky Mellish, he explained to her exactly how he was circumstanced. He informed her that his present income was something less than a hundred a-year, and that he had not enough saved up to buy so much as a door-mat or a cinder-sifter towards housekeeping, but that money

would be coming to him as soon as he was married. Probably, he said, he might then have as much as a thousand or twelve hundred pounds in a lump sum, but from the time he received it his income would cease, and they would have to put the ready cash to the best purpose and make a start in life with it. Becky, who came of poor parents, so far from hesitating when he thus revealed what were his prospects, was delighted, and declared that with only half as much money to handle she would find a means of doubling their capital in twelve months, and live comfortably the while besides. So, with seventeen pounds she had saved out of her earnings, and Fred's six pounds ten, which luckily just then fell due, they got married, and went into furnished apartments.

"But there was one thing that made Fred Cringle secretly anxious, not to say miserable.

"He had, frankly enough, informed his wife of the conditions on which he was to come into his little fortune, with one reservation.

"He had concealed the fact that his uncle had as good as stipulated that he might perhaps agree to what his nephew desired on condition that Fred married some 'plain and homely creature'—one in the laundry line of business preferred! Whereas, Becky was downright handsome.

"Younger than Fred by four years, with a figure that was perfection itself, and the loveliest golden hair, and such teeth and eyes as might have moved even a finger-post to fall at her feet and make love to her.

"So, gentlemen, you perceive the awkwardness of the situation.

"Of course, I am not going to tell you, and you would not believe me if I did, that Fred Cringle so soon after marriage began to regret that his wife was less pretty than she was; but the difficulty was his uncle.

"It was quite optional with his uncle whether he continued to his nephew the monthly allowance, or gave him down in a lump sum what was due to him; and, after the harsh and unnatural stipulation he had made, what would he say when he saw Mrs. C.? Ten to one but that he would put himself in a passion and be less than civil to her, and swear an oath, and stick to it, that, since his nephew preferred to make bad worse rather than act on his advice, he might half starve on thirty shillings a week with his handsome wife, and be hanged to the pair of them.

"Simply to write to his uncle, even though he submitted to the humiliation of enclosing a copy of the marriage certificate, would not suffice.

"The very fact of his adopting such a course would at once rouse the wide-awake old gentleman's suspicions, and he would for a certainty write back and say that he should be glad to see them when they could make it convenient to call on him! 'And then the fat will be in the fire,' said Fred Cringle to himself. 'I know the old hunks and his ways too well to have any doubt about that. He would be furious against me out of sheer envy, if on no other account.'

"So it was that, day after day, and with their little

stock of money rapidly dwindling, he delayed facing the ordeal in store for him.

"Well, they had been married not much more than a month, and Fred's wife had gone out to do some shopping, leaving him at home, when she presently came bursting into the room, laughing and clapping her hands, and exclaiming—

"‘Fred, dear! I’ve seen Uncle Lowtch!’

"‘Nonsense, Beck; he’s in Brighton,’ says her husband. ‘As I’ve told you lots of times, he lives always at Brighton, and never comes to London except on business.’

"‘Then he is up on business now, for I have seen him in Holborn within this last half-hour, and, what is more, he has seen me.’

"Fred opened his eyes at that you may take my word for it. There could be no doubt as to its being Uncle Lowtch she had seen. She described, and even imitated, his hobbling way of walking, and further proved his identity by the evidence of his stoop and round shoulders, his clumsy nose, and his negro-like lips, and, more than all, by his blue spectacles.

"‘Yes, that’s him, sure enough!’ says Fred. ‘How came you first to notice him?’

"‘Because,’ says Becky, laughing, ‘he was noticing me. The goggling old fright! I first caught sight of him through the window while I was in a glove shop, and there he stood, ogling me as though it was the first time in his life he had beheld a pretty woman through those precious blue spectacles of his. I dare say I looked back at him more inquisitively than I should because of its striking me almost as soon as I

set eyes on him who he was, and that very likely encouraged him to keep me in sight after I came out of the glove shop. Anyhow, when I went into the stationer's to get the pens for you, there he was at the window again, and it was so unmistakable that he was smitten and meant to follow me still further, that I had to be so extravagant as to take a cab, which cost me a shilling, and here I am.'

"Fred Cringle's first impulse was to be indignant.

"'The impudent old rascal! followed you, did he, and ogled you? That's his character, confound him. It wouldn't have been good for him had I caught him at it.'

"But Becky only laughed the more. 'Why, you jealous goose,' said she, 'where was the harm? He had no idea who I was.'

"'By George, no!' returned her husband with a meaning grin, 'he wouldn't have looked so pleasantly at you, Becky, if he had known that you were Mrs. Frederick Cringle.'

"His wife opened her eyes.

"'And why not?' she asked him in surprise. 'That is as much as to say that he won't look pleasant when he does see me, knowing who I am.'

"The cat was out now, and there was nothing for it but for Fred to inform his wife exactly how the matter stood.

"'I was more than half afraid before,' said he, kissing her, 'that my uncle would not forgive me for marrying such a pretty creature, and though I can't exactly explain why I think so, I've got a presentiment, Becky, that what has happened won't lessen

the difficulty. You have no idea what a malicious old savage he can be when he likes. It will be a nice business if he won't stump up the ready, and insists on us living on journeyman carpenter's wages.'

"And Fred looked so desponding and miserable that I have no doubt, had his wife been like the majority of newly-married young women, she would there and then have been overwhelmed with grief and indignation, and upbraided him for his unkindness in wishing she was ugly. But Becky was not one of the sentimental sort. She was more disposed to regard the position of affairs from a cool and worldly point of view. She had twice as much shrewdness as he had, and she saw at once that Fred's dismal prognostication would probably be verified if he took her to his uncle and introduced her to him as his wife.

"'It might be more easily got over,' said she, after giving the case some consideration, 'if the fact was brought to his knowledge gradually.'

"'How the deuce could that be done?'

"'He, of course, knows nothing at present,' replied Becky. 'Suppose we went to Brighton—you might easily get to know when Uncle Lowtch returns there—and we could arrange for him meeting us walking together.'

"'And how would that mend matters, Mrs. Wisdom?' asked Fred, laughing at his little wife's simplicity. 'He would recognize you all the same as the strange young lady he was smitten with in Holborn.'

"'Of course he would,' returned the simple creature, with a roguish twinkle in her blue eyes, 'but I am not Mrs. Cringle. I am a single young person,

and we are keeping company, intending to get married some day. You can explain it in that way to him when you call and see him, as, of course, you, as a dutiful nephew, will be bound to, and though he may perhaps storm a bit, he surely might be coaxed to a good humour.'

"'But who is to do the coaxing?' her husband asked, staring at her.

"'If you introduced me to him I could do my share, at all events,' replied Mrs. Becky Cringle, with her prettiest laugh, which showed her double row of pearly teeth. Her husband burst into a roar of laughter.

"'You have been reading "Beauty and the Beast" one would think, Beck. Coax Uncle Lowtch! If you have any idea of trying it, take my advice and have a month's practice first on the Polar bear at the Zoological Gardens. Besides, it is mighty easy to talk about going to Brighton. That can't be done without money, and where is it to be got, my dicky bird? We haven't got three pounds in the house.'

"'I know a young woman who is employed at the millinery place I came from,' said Becky, after a little reflection, 'who has money in the savings bank. We were always much attached to each other. I could easily manage to wheedle her into lending me ten pounds for a few weeks. She is a soft-hearted little fool, and couldn't say no.'

"This was the first enlightenment Fred Cringle had been favoured with as to his wife's energy of purpose and strength of character. It may have surprised him, but he was conscious that he was not a model of moral virtue himself, and, perhaps, was

not displeased to discover that his wife would be less astonished on that account than might have been when she came to know him better. Anyhow, her bold suggestion about wheedling her friend, the milliner, made him take a more favourable view of the probable success of the Brighton scheme, and eventually he consented to it. He knew where to make inquiry, and he learnt that his uncle returned to the sea-side on the morrow, and in three days, Becky having been triumphant in her 'wheedling,' they went to Brighton, and the very next evening, while sauntering on the pier in lover-like conversation, almost ran against Uncle Lowtch, coming in the opposite direction.

"The old gentleman could not have been brought to an anchor with more abruptness if, instead of two living creatures, a dead wall had suddenly risen up before him. He glared at them both through the blue spectacles, and Fred raised his hat, and was about to speak, but, recovering from his amazement, Uncle Lowtch hobbled off before he could get out a word.

"'I wonder if he knew you again, Beck?' her husband anxiously asked her.

"'I am sure he did,' she said laughing. 'No doubt he will give you his opinion of me when you call on him in the morning.'

"'I'd give a trifle to know what is his opinion of me at this present moment!'

"'It wouldn't be worth more than a trifle, I'm afraid, Freddy,' replied his lively little wife. 'He looked as though he loved you as much as he loves his bunions.'

“Next day, with his courage screwed up for the worst, Fred Cringle waited on his uncle, but, to his great amazement, found him not only civil, but more friendly disposed than he had known him to be for many a year. True, at first he appeared inclined to cut up rough, and demanded to know who that fashionable piece of goods was he had seen him with the previous evening, but when his nephew deferentially informed him that she was a highly respectable young woman who worked for a living in the millinery business, and that he was keeping company with her, and hoped, when her circumstances improved, to make her his wife, the old gentleman at once softened, merely remarking that working young women did not usually dress so stylishly as this one. But when Fred pointed out that being employed at a fashionable establishment, she was obliged to make a good appearance, and that being in the way of getting material at first price, and knowing how to make her own dresses and bonnets, they cost her really very little indeed, he had nothing further of a severe or unkind nature to say about her.

“‘I hope, uncle,’ said Fred Cringle, ‘that you do not consider her too good-looking for a poor man’s wife.’

“‘I did not particularly notice her,’ returned Mr. Lowtch, shrugging his shoulders as though that was a matter of no possible concern to him. ‘Rather a wax doll sort of young female I thought her, since you ask me. But I merely glanced at her. She’s not so handsome that you need be afraid after you are married that any one will run away with her.’

"The cunning old blade said this exactly as though he meant it, but Fred, instead of being pleased, as, of course, he should have been, felt huffed, and for two pins would have told him plump and plain that she was already Mrs. Cringle, and that he would wager that she was the prettiest woman in Brighton or anywhere else. Perhaps it would have been as well if he had spoken his mind as plainly, and a thousand times better for his uncle, at all events. But of that," continued Dr. Scrumpitt, "you will be the best judges when you have heard all the story. Old Lowtch wanted, of course, to know what had brought Fred to Brighton, and was informed that it was solely and wholly that his uncle might see the kind of young lady Miss Mellish was, since he was of all things unwilling to marry any one of whom he might disapprove.

"Of course, you remember, uncle," said Fred Cringle, 'you have almost as good as promised to pay me down the value of my annuity in a lump sum when I marry, in your opinion suitably.' Mr. Lowtch made answer evasively, that he supposed there would not be any difficulty about that, and then, quite in a casual and common conversation kind of way, got out of Fred the whereabouts of Miss Mellish's lodgings, and how long they designed staying down there, and all in such an affable way that Fred was delighted, and felt almost as though he already had his little fortune in his pocket.

"If you had been going up to London to-morrow, now,' Uncle Lowtch remarked, 'instead of at the end of next week, I would have asked you to have done a little business for me there.'

"'I will run up on purpose, uncle,' said Fred eagerly, 'and be only too happy to make myself useful to you for once in my life.'

"'So you shall, if you will,' replied Uncle Lowtch. 'Be here at twelve to-morrow and I will give you instructions, and you can catch the one o'clock train.'

"Elated with the success of the scheme, which he could not forget was his clever little wife's, Fred Cringle went home and told her all about it, including the going to London on business for his uncle. 'But,' said he, 'I shall, of course, get back at night, so you won't be many hours alone, my dear. If it is a pleasant day, I should go for a nice long walk, if I were you.'

"Becky promised that she would, laughingly adding that she wondered he was not afraid to trust her out alone. Fred smiled at the idea of there being any need for his being afraid. 'Which reminds me, Beck,' said he, still merry; and he then told her what Uncle Lowtch had said as to her being a 'rather wax doll kind of young female.'

"'The old heathen shrugged his shoulders when I asked him if he considered you too good-looking for a poor man's wife, and remarked that he did not suppose any one would run away with you for your beauty.'

"'Except it were some fine, fascinating fellow like himself,' laughed pretty Mrs. Cringle. But in her heart she knew well enough what was going to happen. 'The wicked old wretch thinks I am single, and he is sending my Fred up to London to-morrow on the

chance of my walking out alone, in which event I have no doubt that he will contrive an accidental meeting with me. He shall have the opportunity for doing so, at any rate.'

"The shrewd little woman's conjecture proved to be a correct one.

"Fred Cringle, with no other thought than to cultivate his uncle's good opinion, started cheerfully for London, and two hours afterwards, the weather being favourable, Mrs. Cringle set out for a solitary excursion. But she had not been walking ten minutes when whom should she meet with but Uncle Lowtch, dressed in his best, and hobbling in a more painful manner than usual, because of his having squeezed his bunions into a new pair of patent leather shoes. 'Miss Mellish' blushed and demurely cast down her bright blue eyes, as, with the gallantry of a brisk young buck of five-and-twenty, he bowed to her.

"But the wicked old file had met with his match, and a little more.

"Pretty Mrs. Cringle had no deep design against her husband's uncle at present, but, bearing in mind his brutal remark as to 'wax doll,' she wanted to be revenged on him.

"I think I have mentioned that she had beautiful eyes, and now, as Uncle Lowtch hobbled by her side in the lane, she made the most of them, as well as of her bewitching conversation, and the end of it was that the gray-headed old sinner, whose only object in meeting her was 'gallivanting,' in the course of a couple of hours fell heart-achingly in love with her.

"Mrs. Cringle could have laughed till her sides

ached at the conquest she had made. In two hours he was fairly in her toils. Half-an-hour later—they were sauntering in a somewhat secluded spot—down went old Mr. Lowtch on his knees, and, with his blue spectacles tremulous on the bridge of his bulbous nose, implored her to have compassion on him and marry him.

"This was what Mrs. Cringle did not for a moment expect, and it took her somewhat aback, bold as she was. Her design in not objecting to old Mr. Lowtch meeting her, as you are already aware, was that she might so charm him with her fascinating manner that he would be unable to resist the appeal she intended to make to him. The scheme she had in her mind was to wheedle and cajole him until he was in good humour with her, and then to confess to him that she and his nephew Fred Cringle were already married, and to beg him to give them his blessing, &c.

"But when the ridiculous old muff flopped down on his knees in the dust in the way mentioned, it gave the affair a complexion she had not bargained for.

"She could have no doubt as to his being in earnest.

"‘I mean it,’ he exclaimed, in tearful tones. ‘I solemnly swear to you, dear Miss Mellish, that I speak from my heart. I have twenty thousand pounds. Say you will be mine, beauteous girl, and, as I have a soul to save, I promise that half of that sum shall be your own, legally settled on you and placed under your sole control.

"She was regularly cornered, you see, and there

was nothing for it but for her to bring the embarrassing situation to a quick conclusion.

"'You forget yourself, sir!' said she, drawing back from him and speaking with offended dignity. 'Surely, you cannot have forgotten—Frederick himself told me that he had informed you of the fact—that my heart and hand are already given to your nephew, and that I am shortly to become his wife?'

"Old Mr. Lowtch's purple nose grew white as he listened to her words.

"'And, notwithstanding my offer, you reject me, and persist in preferring to marry that penniless scamp?' he exclaimed.

"'I have already told you, sir,'" returned Miss Mellish haughtily, 'that my word is pledged to him, and that should be sufficient.'

"'Then listen to me,' cried old Lowtch, rising from his knees, 'marry him and you shall marry poverty! He expects to get a sum of money from me when you become his wife, but he won't get a sixpence. What is more, madam, he may not be aware of it, but it is in my power to stop the paltry annuity he at present enjoys, and by —— I'll do it!'

"And, boiling over with fury, he hobbled off.

"'I've made a nice mess of it!' said little Mrs. Cringle to herself, as she looked after him. 'It will never do to let the old monster go like that. We shall be utterly ruined if I do.'

"So she went after him. The lane was carpeted with dust, and he did not hear her footsteps till she had laid her hand on his own.

"He started as he turned about and found her at

his elbow, her blue eyes filled with tears, and regarding him beseechingly.

"‘I have one favour to beg of you, sir,’ said she. ‘Pray do not harm your innocent nephew on account of any offence I may have given you.’

"‘My nephew’s fate is in your hands, madam,’ Mr. Lowtch made answer, stiffly. ‘If the decision you have given me is unalterable, you have sealed it. Of that you are the best judge. It is not too late. My offer is still open for your acceptance. Reject it, and I will not relent one jot. My nephew shall never again touch a penny of my money. What have you to say to that?’

"‘Give me,’ said she, turning away her head, ‘give me three days to consider it.’

"And, without waiting for his reply, she seized his hand and kissed it, and ran away, leaving him as insanely in love with her as ever.

"Fred Cringle returned from his journey to London still in high spirits, and expecting to find his wife as gay as himself. Therefore, you may judge his astonishment when he discovered her looking very miserable and crying.

"‘Why, what on earth has happened, Beck?’ was his very natural exclamation.

"‘Have you seen your uncle?’ she asked him.

"‘Just left him. There is nothing to cry about as far as he is concerned, my love. He actually asked me to take a glass of wine with him, and gave me a sovereign for my trouble to-day. ’Pon my word, I shall begin to think that I have been doing the old chap some amount of injustice.’

"'You couldn't, if you tried,' exclaimed little Mrs. Cringle, stamping her foot, and with her blue eyes flashing with passion; 'he is a vile old wretch—a vindictive, treacherous old villain!'

"Fred Cringle gasped for breath, and, staring at his wife, sank on to a chair, with his mouth ajar.

"'You never mean to tell me,' he presently remarked, 'that he has found out——'

"'It is I who have found out,' she interrupted him; 'found out, I mean, what a fool I have been in advising that we should come down here pretending we were not yet married. My pretty scheme has ruined us. That is the long and short of it.'

"And then she related all that had happened since he had been away. It was an awful collapse of their brilliant expectations. It would have been bad enough if only the negotiation for receiving the value of his annuity, cash down, had fallen through; but to be threatened with absolute beggary!

"'And the crafty old scoundrel will keep his word if it is in his power to do so, there is no mistake,' said poor Fred, with a groan. 'It isn't a confession to him that we are already man and wife will save us. That would make him more savage and malicious than ever.'

"'And do you think that he really has it in his power to carry out his threat as regards the money?' his wife asked him.

"'All I know is,' returned her husband, despairingly, 'that I can show no legal claim. I am quite in his hands, and he is villain enough for anything. The kindest thing I can do for you, my dear,' he added,

with grim humour, 'is to commit suicide, and then you can become Mrs. Lowtch, with ten thousand pounds of your own, and there we have the whole matter settled comfortably. Speaking of suicide, I am already engaged to assist in a murder.'

"Mrs. Cringle looked up at her husband in alarm and amazement, as though fearing that the sudden calamity had turned his brain.

"'It is only dog murder,' he said, smiling. 'The old Mephistopheles—my uncle, I mean—has a favourite dog who has grown deaf and blind with age, and he commissioned me this morning to get some poison of the right sort to put it out of its misery painlessly. If I thought there was a shadow of a chance of finding myself in his will it would be a temptation to divide the dose between him and the other cur.'

"They sat discussing the doleful change in their prospects until bedtime, and, despite his troubles, Mr. Cringle soon fell asleep.

"Not so his wife.

"She lay awake, all in the dark, devising and thinking and turning and twisting the tangle they had become involved in this way and that, with a view to finding a loop-hole of escape in it till about three in the morning, when, by way of waking her husband, she gave him a jog with her elbow. It was a cruel thing to do, inasmuch as at the moment Fred Cringle was in the midst of a delicious dream. He had compounded with Uncle Lowtch for his annuity for the sum of fifteen hundred pounds, and Becky and himself were just about setting out for a month's trip to Scarborough, in celebration of the happy event.

"'Fred,' said she, 'what induced your uncle to ask you to procure poison to kill the old dog?'

"'Because, when he happened to mention his desire to be rid of it, I remarked that I knew a chemist of whom I could obtain what was needful.'

"'Did you say what that was; or did he?'

"'Not that I remember. Are you so particularly anxious to know that you couldn't wait till the morning to ask me?'

"'Don't be cross, Fred. I have been thinking, and I have a reason for asking now. Tell me this, too—should you judge, from his manner, that he had resolved for the present, and in spite of what has happened, to appear friendly with you?'

"'For the present, undoubtedly, which means, I suppose, until the expiration of the three days' grace you begged of him. Confound him! he shall have the answer before then.'

"'So he shall,' coolly rejoined Mrs. Becky Cringle. 'But it mustn't be the kind you think of giving him.'

"'Mustn't it? Choking is too good for him, you think, p'r'aps?'

"'There must be no violence of language or action either. In fact, Fred, you must not answer him at all. You must leave that to me.'

"'And what shall you tell him?'

"'I shall tell him that we are already married, and at the same time hint that I am sorry it is so.'

"Mr. Cringle raised his head from his pillow, and regarded his wife as a man might who is seven-eighths sure that he is dreaming; but in the grim gray of

early morning twilight he saw that she was wide awake, and perfectly calm and collected.

"'What the deuce is the woman talking about?' he exclaimed angrily. 'What good can come of telling him that?'"

"'Don't fly into a childish pet before you know my reasons, Fred. You have yet to learn what a clever little wife you have. While you were snoring I have been scheming, and do you know—now, listen attentively, and without making any unnecessary exclamation—do you know, my dear husband, that I can see a way by which, with judicious management on your part, as well as mine, we can squeeze as much, and p'raps a great deal more, out of Uncle Lowtch than if you had sold your annuity to him.'"

"'I shall be but too glad to admit that you are the cleverest little wife in the whole world if you can do as you say,' replied her husband incredulously. 'But, I must tell you beforehand, that I don't like the idea of your telling the wicked old rascal, even in make-believe, that we are married, and that you are sorry for it. Can't that part of your scheme be modified?'"

"'It turns entirely on it,' replied Mrs. Becky Cringle determinedly, pursing her lips. 'But I didn't say that I should actually tell him that I was sorry for it. He must be led to infer it. He must be led to infer it to the extent that he is tempted to do something desperate—anything to alter it.'"

"'To alter what?'"

"'My being married.'"

"Fred Cringle laughed.

"'My dear Becky, you are getting out of your

depth in cleverness now,' said he. 'How could he alter our being married?'

"'By making me a widow,' returned Mrs. Becky Cringle, as coolly as though she were answering a conundrum.

"'Now, listen to me. Your uncle is in love with me. He swore that he had never actually experienced a real passion for any woman in his life before, and I believe him. I further believe that with judicious treatment the infatuated old idiot might be brought to a state of mind in which he would stick at nothing in consequence. I presume that you can rely on it that it is not likely that I should lose my heart on such a hideous old hunk under any circumstance. So you must leave that part of my scheme to me. As for the three days I have asked him for, that may be extended to a week—a fortnight for that matter. It will be your affair, when he has been made sufficiently desperate, to give him an opportunity to do away with such a hated obstacle as you are.'

"'Well, of course I cannot object to aid your little project,' remarked Fred Cringle, mildly sarcastic, 'to that trifling extent. Have you any preference as to the way in which it should be done? If you have, my dear, you have but to mention it.'

"'Yes,' returned his amazing wife, 'I have turned that over in my mind with the rest, and I think he had best poison you. It may be very easily managed. It was his asking you to get some poison for the dog that put it into my head. No poison, you say, was mentioned by name, and you are to apply to your wise friend, the chemist, for a kind that will best serve the

purpose. You delay obtaining it until such time as I have had another interview with dear uncle, and he is brought to such a pitch that he hates every hair of your head, but still makes a show of being affable with you, and then you produce the poison.’

“‘And politely volunteer to take a dose of it myself in proof of its deadly qualities.’

“‘No; be serious and listen. You will probably be taking wine together, or you might, to make more sure, drop in at breakfast time when he is taking his coffee, and you remark, “By the bye, I’ve got that poison for the old dog at last; and a very extraordinary kind of stuff it is,” and you show him the bottle. “Simple as it looks,” says you, “it is as clear as water, and I am told by my friend, the chemist, quite tasteless; half the quantity here will kill a strong dog in seven seconds. But that isn’t its most curious property,” you go on to say in a light, chatty way; “if a dog or a man—it would operate the same in either case—took the whole contents of this small phial, he would not die immediately. He would feel no ill effects, excepting an increasing languor, for probably nearly a week, when he would suddenly be attacked with spasms and expire in the course of a few hours.” You manage all that, Fred, as cleverly as you can, if you try, and, as I said before, the breakfast things being on the table, it is almost as good as certain that our delightful old relative will ask you to take a cup of coffee. He may, perhaps, make some excuse for sending you out of the room beforehand, but, mark my words, there will be coffee for you.’

“Fred Cringle might have fallen asleep again, he

lay so still, but it was his utter amazement that kept him so. He never for a moment dreamt that his wife possessed any talent for scheming at all, and here she was suddenly developed into a heroine of sensational romance.

"Well, what do you say to my plot? Is it a foolish or a clever one?' she presently asked him.

"Devilish clever,' her husband answered; which it was. There could be no doubt about that.

"But this poison,' Fred Cringle asked, after a further pause of silent cogitation. 'What is it to be, really?'

"Water, simply.'

"But how, in that case,' argued her husband with a shrewdness that was significant of his having no objection to the scheme as a whole, 'am I to know for certain that he has administered the dose to me? I could not taste the addition of a spoonful of plain water to a cupful of tea or coffee.'

"True. Then it must be flavoured with a drop or two of essence of almonds. You will be able to smell as well as taste that.'

"Well, go on, Becky. Let us assume that our precious plan has been so far successfully accomplished. What next?'

"That will do for the present,' returned Mrs. Cringle. 'What is to come next will, in good time, suggest itself.'

"I need not go into the particulars," continued Dr. Scrumpitt, "of her next interview with old Lowtch. It would be no use my attempting it, in fact, since no one but their two selves knew exactly the terms of it.

Anyhow, she acted up to the programme she had sketched to her husband as regards confessing to the uncle that she was already married, and she, no doubt, was clever enough to insinuate, without downright saying it, that, if she had remained single, as in the first place he had supposed her, she might possibly have taken a different view of his generous offer. But what was done could not be undone. She was his nephew's wife, and the rock of Gibraltar itself was not more firm than her resolve to cheerfully share his lot, whatever it might be, and remain true and faithful to him. At the same time, on her knees she implored him to reconsider the harsh decision he had expressed three days since, and not consign her husband, as well as herself, to abject poverty, and, above all, she conjured him not to breathe a word to Fred of this confession.

"‘It is not as though we need be quite estranged,’ said this awfully artful young woman. ‘Be reconciled to me, dear Uncle Lowtch, and love me with an uncle’s love. Make my present happiness complete with the knowledge that if any misfortune, at present unforeseen, should befall me, I have one kind friend to whom to apply for advice and counsel.’

"It was some satisfaction to the vindictive old rascal to hear her say this.

"‘You may make tolerably sure of misfortune, Mrs. Cringle,’ he remarked maliciously. ‘Ten to one, when I have cut off the supplies, he will run away and leave you in less than a twelvemonth.’

"‘He might die, even, and that would be worse for a fond wife to bear, a thousand million times. What

could console me then? Say, oh, say for my sake, that you forgive him!

"‘I will say nothing at all,’ returned the wicked old gentleman, with his brain in a whirl, ‘nothing at present, that is to say, and I rely on you to be equally discreet. As you just now remarked, what *could* console you in the event of my undutiful nephew dying? When do you return to London?’

"‘At the end of the present week.’

"‘Then I shall meanwhile probably have an opportunity of speaking with you on this subject again,’ said Uncle Lowtch.

"‘And you will not, for the present, at all events, betray to my husband the confidence I have reposed in you? Should you see him you will not let him see that you are angry?’

"Uncle Lowtch rather liked the turn the conversation had taken. He almost grinned as he made answer—

"‘You remember the play of “Richard the Third,” and the remark that ill-judged king made as to his ability to control his countenance under trying circumstances? Accept that, then, for my reply to your last question.’

"Thus they parted, and Mrs. Cringle, agreeing with her husband that it was time now to put that old dog of Uncle Lowtch’s out of his misery, the next morning Fred made his appearance at breakfast-time at the hotel where his uncle was living, and was as cordially received as he could desire to be. Mr. Cringle followed his wife’s instructions word for word almost. ‘By the way,’ said he, clapping his

hand to his pocket, 'I have got that stuff for poor old Ponto at last—the poison, you know.' And he unwrapped the tiny phial that did not hold more than a thimbleful, and handed it to his uncle.

"'Pray be careful of it,' said he, 'it is horribly deadly.'

"'It looks simple enough,' observed Mr. Lowtch, holding it to the light, 'it is as clear-looking as water.'

"'And as my friend, the chemist, told me, it is absolutely tasteless. Nevertheless, half what you have there will prove fatal to a large dog in ten seconds. But that is not the most curious of its properties. Half the quantity kills, whereas the whole dose would not.'

"'That is not uncommon with poisons.'

"'No; but this one differs from all others known in this respect. It would not kill immediately, but fatal results would be merely postponed. Given to a dog or to a man—the effect would be the same in either case—the immediate result would be nothing, not for a couple of days, probably. But an increasing languor would steal over the victim after that, and he would expire, without any pain to speak of, about the end of a week.' Uncle Lowtch, who was munching a morsel of toast at the moment, suddenly looked up at Fred, and gasped as though his food had gone the wrong way, as the saying is.

"'What is the matter, my dear sir?' exclaimed his anxious nephew. 'You don't seem well?'

"'It is only—only a little touch of an attack of something in the nature of spasms of the muscles of the

throat I've been troubled with lately,' returned his uncle, with apparent difficulty. 'I've been obliged to get some medicine for it. The bottle is on the mantel-shelf in my bed-room. You know where it is; I wish that you would fetch it for me.'

"Fred obeyed with alacrity, and presently returned.

"'There is no bottle on the shelf, sir,' said he.

"'Then I suppose I must have put it away,' returned the cold-blooded old assassin; 'but it does not matter. The attack was but slight, and has passed away. Won't you take some tea? I've poured a cup out for you.'

"'Just to keep you company I will,' replied his nephew, cheerfully, and he raised it to his lips.

"The 'flavour' was there! Almonds, beyond a shadow of a doubt!

"'I don't know how it is,' Fred remarked, as he smilingly sipped, 'why I so seldom drink tea at breakfast. It always seems to do me good.'

"'I hope what you are drinking now may agree with you,' returned Uncle Lowtch, cracking an egg.

"'It is rather stronger than I like it,' said his nephew.

"'Put some more milk in it. When do you return with Miss Mellish to London?'

"'Well, I have not exactly decided,' Fred replied, laughingly. 'Poor fellows like me, uncle, can't do as we like. If I had a few pounds more than I have got I should like to stay another week.'

"'Then it is a good job you have not got them,' replied Uncle Lowtch hastily. 'Another week!' (and he thought of what his nephew had said as to the

strange working of the ‘poison,’ and Fred had by this time swallowed the whole of it). ‘No, no. You get back to London. You have had idleness enough, I am sure, and so has that young woman. I’ll give you a couple of sovereigns, but on conditions that you be off to-morrow morning. And as regards that other business—you know what I allude to—make a reasonable calculation of how much you think I should give you, and I will see what can be done.’

“And then shaking his nephew by the hand, and telling him that he thought he saw symptoms of amendment in him, and hoped he was not mistaken, he bade him ‘good-bye.’

“Fred Cringle went back to his wife and related what had occurred, and for a man who had swallowed a fatal dose, and a woman who might with certainty look forward to being a widow in a week’s time, they were both in wonderfully good spirits. They had not much luggage to pack, and they went by an early train next morning to London.

“Uncle Lowtch meanwhile remained at Brighton. What was the condition of his conscience during the week following his nephew’s departure is, of course, impossible for me to say, or what it was he looked forward for, except one thing.

“He had no doubt that he had effectually settled his nephew’s business, and that in all probability in a very short time he should hear from Mrs. Cringle the dreadful intelligence of her husband’s demise. I think it is very likely that his mind was employed more in deciding what course he should pursue in this last-

mentioned event than in mourning the murderous act he had committed.

"But if he thought that he should in the first place hear from Widow Cringle by post he was mistaken.

"She appeared in person.

"Eight days after the pair left Brighton she arrived at the hotel, seeking Uncle Lowtch, and, to that old gentleman's amazement and dismay, apparently in much the same mood as a lioness who seeks the destroyer of her cubs, that she may take vengeance on him. He was breakfasting in the self-same little room where the addition was made to his nephew's tea-cup, and, being shown up by an attendant, Mrs. Cringle entered, and, closing the door, turned the key in the lock, and stood confronting him, pale with suppressed emotion, and with heaving bosom and flashing eyes.

"‘My dear Mrs. Cringle,’ ejaculated Mr. Lowtch, ‘what—what is the meaning of this? What, pray, can I do for you?’

"He was in his dressing-gown and slippers, and the alarming aspect of the apparition had deprived him of strength to rise from his chair while he asked the question. But he somehow managed, by means of its castors, to back at least a yard towards the wall, as, with hands raised denouncingly, she advanced towards him—

"‘Give me back,’ she exclaimed, with her white teeth firmly set together, ‘give me back my murdered husband!’

"As he sat staring at her, he was for several seconds powerless to make reply, and when he could,

it was merely to gasp, guiltily, 'Murdered! Your husband—my nephew—murdered!'

"'Ay,' returned the widow, with the mien of a queen of tragedy, 'and by your hand.'

"At that old Mr. Lowtch made a superhuman effort to raise himself.

"'It is false!' he exclaimed, rising from his chair. 'Woman! how dare you bring such a dreadful accusation against me? What—what could have put the mad idea into your head?'

"Mrs. Cringle came close to him and laid a hand on his shaky arm.

"'What could have put into your head the fiendish idea,' she said slowly, 'to give to him the deadly poison he procured for you to give to the dog?'

"'It is a lie! a base, black lie! Who dare assert it of me?'

"'My husband himself, in his last moments,' she made answer, tears coursing each other down her pale cheeks. 'It was not till then that the terrible suspicion flashed to his mind, and he revealed to me all that he knew—his showing you the deadly stuff and explaining its nature—your sending him out of the room on pretence of fetching for you a bottle of medicine from your bed-room, and which was not there, so that you might put the poison in the cup of tea you poured out for him during his absence. It was not until he felt his end approaching that all this came back to his memory. It was not until after his death,' she continued, lowering her voice and fixing him with her eyes, 'that there came back to my memory the words you addressed to me at our last

interview, and when you so infamously misconstrued my innocent remarks so that it seemed to you that you might gain something by my dear husband's death. Shall I remind you of those words? When I begged of you to appear, at all events, to be on good terms with your nephew, you reminded me of a passage in the play of "Richard the Third," "I can murder while I smile," and bade me take that for an answer.'

"Uncle Lowtch grew each moment more appalled.

"'But this is all talk,' he presently exclaimed, desperately. 'Where is the proof? I defy you to show it. When did your husband die?'

"'Last night,' replied Widow Cringle, sobbing in her pocket-handkerchief. 'I am but obeying his dying request in coming to you. "Go to my uncle," he said, "as soon as I am no more, and tell him that I forgive him." I promised, and I have fulfilled my promise; but I will not forgive. No! I will pursue my dear husband's destroyer to the gallows!' Old Mr. Lowtch remained in his chair and turned ghastly-looking hearing that.

"'But the proof! the proof! I defy you to prove what you accuse me of.'

"'That,' she replied, with the calmness of one who can wait for vengeance assured, 'will be for the doctors when I make public my suspicions. I have done my errand, I will now leave you.'

"'And where are you going?' he asked her.

"'In the first place to the police-office here,' returned Widow Cringle, 'that steps may be taken to prevent your escape.'

“The conscience-guilty man groaned aloud and covered his face with his hands.

“‘Listen to reason,’ he exclaimed. ‘I do not admit having committed this dreadful crime, mind that, but it would be death to me to be brought up to answer for it, even though I proved my innocence, as I doubtless should be able to. But you feel—and naturally, perhaps—that you are entitled to revenge, and you shall have it, but in a way that shall more substantially benefit you than prosecuting me. As I have already told you, I have twenty thousand pounds. Take a quarter of it, and have my unlucky nephew buried quietly, and let the matter drop. If you only knew,’ he continued with unmistakable earnestness, ‘what horrible anguish it is to have a fourth of a slowly-accumulated fortune dragged away from you, you would grant my request, were it only on the ground of its being the greater punishment.’

“The young widow regarded him with a malicious light in her eyes.

“‘If I could but think that it would be a greater punishment,’ said she; ‘and to a man so grasping and miserly perhaps it might be——.’

“‘It would. Pray believe me. Upon my soul it would!’ Uncle Lowtch, with trembling eagerness, interrupted her. ‘Time is precious in a case like this, my dear madam. Give me a suitable receipt, and I will draw you a cheque on the Brighton Bank for five thousand pounds at once.’

“She hesitated yet a little time.

“‘And will you come to dear Fred’s funeral?’ she asked him. But he could not be brought to promise

that, and, after a little more pressing, she took the cheque, and gave a suitable receipt, and bagging the money before she took train for London again, went back to Fred Cringle rejoicing, and the wicked pair, leaving England for France, were never seen in London afterwards."

THE PRECIOUS PICKLE JAR.

IT being my good fortune to be on excellent terms with more than one of those who have had management of those invaluable institutions known as Discharged Prisoners' Aid Societies, I have had frequent opportunities for talking with men who, having served long or short periods of penal servitude, have resolved at last to turn over a new leaf, and with the assistance of the helping hand so willingly held out to them, try and do better than hitherto during the remainder of their lives. It is no part of my present purpose to treat of the incalculable good that is done in this way, but I may just mention, in proof of it, that one society alone, whose head-quarters are in Brooke-street, Holborn, and whose secretary is Mr. Wheatley, has the great gratification of knowing that of the many scores of cases they have to deal with in the course of the year at least half the number are successes. A few may backslide, but by far the majority of their ex-convict clients, steadfastly fortified and encouraged thereto, grasp the chance afforded them and manfully stick to it.

I cannot, however, go as far as to testify that of all the instances brought to my knowledge there have been none in which the desire to reform has sprung from other than the dictates of an awakened conscience. As, for example, I was speaking only recently with a man, whose real name I, for obvious reasons, suppress, and who has for several years past been honestly pursuing the peaceful calling of a jobbing tailor, who frankly confessed to me that though he now saw the advantages of keeping straight, and was not at all likely to go crooked again, he should probably have continued in the wrong path but that he was afraid for his very life that a "pal," who was filled with hatred and vengeance against him, and who was then in prison, should seek and find him when he was discharged therefrom. This is the tailor's story:—

"Jack Rann and I had planned a little job not far from the Euston-road. It was to come off on a Tuesday night, and we had arranged to meet at twelve o'clock near some houses that were being built, but were not yet finished, about ten minutes' walk from the place where we were going to do the burglary. It was a dark and rainy night, and I had to come from Drury-lane, where I was living at the time, and Jack lived in Somers Town. I was coming past the churchyard wall of old St. Pancras Church, when, the rain coming down suddenly with drenching heaviness, I stood close up under the wall for a few minutes. Presently, who should I see getting over from the inside but Jack himself.

"He wasn't much more than a dozen yards distant from the spot where I was standing, and at first I

could see only his head and shoulders, and he was looking about him, cautious like, this way and that, before he climbed over to the street. I couldn't make out what he had been doing there, and but for his being a nasty-tempered chap and secret in his ways, I should have joined him there and then and asked him. But I thought better of it, and stood still in the dark, and saw him walk off brisk in the direction I was going. He reached the unfinished houses before I did, and, as it was still raining heavy, and we had plenty of time before us, we went into one of the houses—they were only just in carcase, and there were no doors or windows to them yet—for shelter, and then I found that Jack was drunk, and when in that state he was all talk and brag. He was in a good humour, and laughingly told me that he shouldn't have come at all if he had not made the appointment with me, and he didn't mean to do any business that night. He had been at 'work,' he told me. 'And I'll bet you a pound,' said Jack Rann, 'that you don't guess in forty times what I've been up to.'

"'You've been in luck, any way,' says I. 'You've made a good haul somewhere, I reckon.'

"'Not to-night I hav'n't,' says he; 'that was last night. To-night I've been to a funeral.'

"I had it on the tip of my tongue to tell him that I had seen him climbing over the churchyard wall, but seeing that he was acting the mysterious, I didn't. I remarked instead—

"'It isn't everybody who is in such good spirits, Jack, coming from a funeral; and what a queer time

for it! I thought it was only those who made away with themselves when in a sound mind that were buried at night time.'

"'What I dug a hole for in churchyard ground,' said Jack Rann, 'couldn't make away with itself. It wouldn't have stirred a peg from the iron coffin where I found it if it hadn't been for somebody with boldness and with cleverness to make away with it. There's a riddle for you, Teddy Whelpdale,' he says, laughing in his boastful way. 'Guess it, and you shall have half profits. Rifled out of a iron coffin and put into a earthenware one and buried at dead of a windy, rainy night in a churchyard, with never a mourner to follow—only one there at all, and him a rejoicer and not a mourner, and no parson to read a service, and no clerk to say "Ar-men!" And now what do you make of it?'

"I answered, to humour him, that I couldn't make anything of it, and that I gave the riddle up.

"'Then I'll tell you,' says he. 'Have you heard anything about a job in the Marylebone-road? Done last night, I mean.'

"No, I had not.

"'More have I, as yet, though I've been looking out for it all day. I did it, Teddy, single-handed, at a watchmaker's and jeweller's. And such a nest of eggs I never come across before, old son. I broke open the iron safe—that was the "coffin" in my riddle—and stuffed my pockets—jacket and trowsis as well—and all with good goods, hall-marked, and nothing under 12-carat. I hav'n't weighed 'em, but if there's an ounce there must be seven or eight

pounds dead weight, to say nothing about the stones in some of the rings. But of course you'll see 'em, for I shall want your missus to work off some of the safest. But none of it has been worked off yet. P'r'aps I shan't touch it for a week. P'r'aps not for three months. At present it's all in a half-gallon pickle jar, and buried in the churchyard.'

"'What churchyard?' I asked him. But Jack Rann tapped his nose at that.

"You are a good pal,' he says, laughing, 'and I'm very fond of you, but, "which churchyard" is getting too warm on the scent. P'r'aps it's up Fulham way, or it may be over t'w'rds Camberwell. I know whereabouts it is, and that's enough.'

"'It's enough for me,' says I; 'I'd rather you didn't tell me any more. Else, if any one should happen to find what you've hid, you might think I'd played Judas.'

"'Nobody could find it without the clue,' says he, 'and that nobody but me could give 'em. I'll give it to you, Teddy,' says he, in his swaggering way, and p'r'aps because being drunk he was less close than was usual with him. 'I won't tell you the churchyard, but it's one in not more than a hundred within five miles of London, so if you set about looking for it, you won't have a very hard job. And when you find it, says you, "This is the right one, and this is the wall." Stop a minute,' says Jack, 'I'll chalk it out on this chimbley-pot.'

"When we entered the unfinished house we went up the passage and into the back parlour, and Jack, having a dark lantern with him, he turned on a little

of the light so that we might see where we were. There was a lot of new chimney-pots of the square, white kind, stacked against the wall ready to carry up on to the roof, and just to show off his cleverness and cunning, he picked up a carpenter's nail off the floor, and he says—

“‘When you’ve found the right churchyard and the wall—which this line is the wall—you jump over just where there is a tombstone with iron railings round it, and you count your steps, walking straight forward, till you have paced this number of them’—and without mentioning the number, he scratched it on the chimney-pot—‘and then you turn sharp to the right, and you count this number of steps’—and he scratched on the pot again—‘and there you are, and at your feet, spit deep, is my little gold mine. And now, Teddy Whelpdale, you have only got to take this chimbley-pot under your arm, by way of plans and drawings, and you can go in for a little game of “hot b’iled beans” that will be worth your while, and with the certainty of winning.’

“He had a drop of spirits in a bottle in his pocket, and while we waited for the rain to stop, which still kept peppering down, we drank it. He still said that he didn’t mean to have anything to do with the Euston-road affair that night, not feeling fit for it, but when I told him about a certain something I had got to know of since I saw him last, and which would make the job almost as easy as a man going into a house with his own latch-key, and as I had the tools with me, he at last consented, and we went. We went; and through, p’raps, Jack being more drunk

than I thought he was, we made a mess of it. We had got the things together all right and comfortable down in the kitchen ready to come away, when Jack swore he would have something to drink first, if it was only beer, and we was heard in the beer-cellar by the policeman, and the end of it was that Jack Rann was took and I got away, leaving every blessed penn'orth of the haul behind.

"I had a better start than he would have had if he had been as lucky in giving the police the slip, for I wasn't much known in London. I was a Birmingham hand, and not much better than a 'prentice, in a manner of speaking, and my object in coming to London and chumming in with Jack Rann was to learn to be a 'workman.' I got away, but I thought it best to keep dark for a time, for I knew Jack had floored the policeman with a crack over the head, and I saw in the paper next morning that the man had been taken to the hospital, and was bad. I read that the other burglar who had escaped had been seen and could be sworn to. So I went to Rotherhithe, to a cousin of mine who was employed on the barges, and worked along with him for a month or more, and so kept out of the way.

"I got tired of the lightering, and came back to London and went to Jack's wife, and she told me that Jack had got five years. I was anxious to see her for other reasons than to learn about Jack. All the time I had been on the barges I had that churchyard business in my mind. I didn't have the shadow of a doubt but that what he had told me about it was all true. The particulars of the robbery in the Mary-

lebone-road was in the newspapers, and the value of the goods—of which there was a list half as long as your arm—was stated to be thirteen hundred pounds. What I wondered at most was, if Jack Rann had told his wife where the pickle jar with seven or eight pounds' weight of watches and chains and rings in it was stowed. That was mainly what I went to see her for. But I soon got out of her that she knew something, but not all. She told me that she was certain that Jack had a lot of good stuff hid away somewhere, but she didn't know where. She was a close one, and didn't tell me that she knew that it was got in the Marylebone-road. She only said that Rann had been busy lately, and that he himself had told her, the very night when he set out to meet me, that if things went on swimmingly as at present, he hoped to have a few hundreds in the bank by Christmas. He had sent for her to come and see him after he was sentenced, but it wasn't allowed, and all the message he had sent her by the lawyer was that 'golden days' were in store for her if she kept true and faithful till he got his ticket. 'So I should judge from that,' said Mrs. Rann, 'that Jack had made a plant somewhere, and that he wanted to tell me where.' I knew where. At least I knew that it was in old St. Pancras churchyard.

"There could be no question about that.

"I had seen Jack getting over the wall, and the churchyard clay was on the boots he stood in when he bragged to me about the 'funeral' he had been to. But at that time of day old St. Pancras churchyard was a large place, with hundreds and hundreds of tombstones in it, though it was shut up and no

more buryings were allowed there. It was like looking for a pin in a meadow, but soon after I had visited Mrs. Rann I put a trowel in my pocket, and went to the churchyard and got over the wall at the same spot where I saw Jack's head and shoulders pop up.

"But I couldn't make anything of it.

"There was a tombstone with iron railings round it, but the grass everywhere was tangled and rank, and I cursed Jack Rann and his secretness a dozen times while I went crawling on my hands and knees among it for an hour and more trying to find a clue to his 'little gold mine.' I was as hard up as could be. I was married, and had my wife in London, but she was hardly any help at all to me in my line—in fact, she worked honest at the plate-polishing at Birmingham, and didn't know what my line was till after we were married, and as I only had a few shillings a week besides my food while I was keeping out of the way on the barges, she had been obliged to pawn and make away with things to keep herself. And all the time there was thirteen hundred pounds' worth of valuables as free to me as picking a daisy, if I only knew whereabouts in the tangled grass Jack Rann had made a hole. I had hardly thought about the chimbley-pot up to that time, but while I was prowling and swearing among the tombstones, I all of a sudden thought of his jeering words.

"All you've got to do is to take this chimbley-pot under your arm, by way of plans and drawings, and you can go in for a little game of "hot b'iled beans," with a certainty of winning.'

"Could I get that chimbley-pot?

"I remembered that though his words were 'I will chalk it out on this,' he hadn't chalked it. He had picked up a sharp, new floor-board nail and scratched the 'plan' with it, and likewise the number of paces that were to be took straight ahead, and then sharp to the right. It wasn't at all likely that the marks could have been rubbed off. Jack had made them in a rough and heavy-handed sort of way, and the scratches were no doubt deep. It was now nearly nine weeks since we were together in the empty houses, and I had not been that way since, and, for all I know, the chimbley-pots might be stacked in the back parlour still.

"I went off, there and then, to see about it, and you may reckon how disappointed I was to find that not only were the houses finished, but every one, except the first in the road, which was a corner house, was occupied.

"There were seven houses in the row, and, as well as I could remember, the one that Jack Rann and I went into for shelter was the middle one. I could count the chimbley-pots, standing on the other side of the way, and there were nine, and there couldn't have been but two or three more than that in the stack, one of which Jack had made the 'plan' on, so that it seemed very likely that the number of pots required for each house was placed there separate, and that, therefore, my pot was on the roof of the middle house.

"It was something to be able to come to that conclusion, but not much.

"If I could somehow manage to get on the roofs.

It was no good otherwise, and what made it all the more difficult was, that, if done at all, it must be by daylight, otherwise how was I to search for the chimbley-pot with the scratches on it? How was I to get up there, was the question? They were three-storeyed houses, and no ladder shorter than a fifty-round one would reach from the street to the top of one of them, and where was I to get a fifty-round ladder, which couldn't be raised without the help of a couple of men beside myself, even if I had leave to raise it. I went home and lay awake nearly all night thinking about it, but I did not say anything to my wife, and got off to sleep at last with the happy idea that it wouldn't be hard to get into the corner house, which was at present empty, and climb out on to the roof by the trap-door.

"I was there again before daylight, and got into the house easily enough by slipping back the kitchen window-catch, but my trouble was all for nothing, for when I went up-stairs I found that there was no trap-door to the roof to get out at. But there was a big prize at stake, and I couldn't give up the chance of it. For more than a week I puzzled and puzzled, and at last I hit on a plan, not to raise a ladder against the empty corner house myself, but to get somebody else to do it. The rain gutter-pipe ran from the top of the house to the bottom, and was fixed to the wall within a foot of the back windows, and it was made of cast iron. I got a heavy hammer, and I went into the empty house at night-time, by the same means as before, and I went to the top back window, and opened it, and, reaching out, with a couple of blows smashed

the pipe, more than a foot length of it falling down into the yard below. It made noise enough, and I dare say those who lived next door heard it, as might any one who chanced to be passing ; but it was dark, and no one could tell exactly where the sound came from, and after remaining quiet for a time, I closed the window, and got off without any trouble.

“ I went next day to have a look, and there was the smashed pipe, but nobody seemed in a hurry to mend it, and I was kept in a worry of expectation about the confounded thing for nearly a fortnight, till one morning I found a ladder there. But I was almost too late. The workmen had been there early, and the job was done, and they had gone, leaving the ladder for the present. There was no time to lose. There was nobody about to notice me, dressed like a labourer, going up the ladder just as though I had a right to, and I got on to the roof quiet and comfortable, and wasn't long making my way to the row of chimbleypots of the middle house. But I had a rare hunt to find what I wanted. I looked so long for it that I began to think I had had all my trouble for nothing, and so I had, as far as the top row was concerned. There was no ‘ plan ’ scratched on any one of them, but there were two rooms built out at the back with a tall brick stack and the pots a-top, and, with the morning sun shining on them, I could make out on one quite plain scratches and figures—‘ 75 ’ this way, and ‘ 33 ’ the other.

“ That was all that I wanted to know.

“ I had brought a pencil and a bit of paper with me so that if I had any luck there might not be any

mistake, and I marked the figures down carefully, and put the paper in my pocket, and, hiding behind the parapet, crawled back over the other house-roofs to get back to the ladder. But it had gone. I peeped over the parapet just in time to see three men finish lowering it with a rope, and there I was, without a chance of getting down, since, as I have already said, there was no trap-door in the roof. What I should have done was, chance the consequences, and call down to the men to put the ladder up again, but, of course, I had it in my mind that it was I who had smashed the pipe and been the cause of all the expense and trouble, and, besides that, I was 'wanted,' and it would very likely go bad with me if I was given in charge, however little I had been doing to deserve it.

"Anyhow, I let the men and the ladder go, and passed a miserable, hungry day crawling over the house-tops and trying to find a way to get down. But it was all no use, and when night came I resolved to make a bold push for it. Neither of the new houses had a trap-door in the roof, but the old houses next to them had, and waiting until, as I thought, everybody living there must be in bed, I forced one of them and got into the attic, where, luckily for me, no one was sleeping. But my luck did not last long. Slipping off my boots, I stepped softly down the stairs, meaning to make my way out by the street door, but there was a little dog in the passage, and, of course, he heard me and set up a barking, and while I stood on the stairs hesitating what I should do, a bed-room door was suddenly thrown open, and a big fellow sprang at me and pinned me.

"It was all over then.

"I had no weapon to defend myself, and the grip the chap had on my throat was enough to strangle me, and, not satisfied with that, he gave me one in the face with his fist that brought me down, and then he knelt on me while others in the house were roused and a policeman fetched in.

"I needn't go through the long rigmarole of what followed. I was charged before the magistrate with attempted burglary, and recognized as the man who was wanted for acting with Jack Rann in the Euston-road job, and, like him, I was sentenced to five years' penal. Being convicted from the same court and in the same district, it was no wonder that, after being at Pentonville for a few months, I was sent off to Portland, where Jack, too, was booked for.

"But I didn't give up all hope of touching the churchyard treasure yet. Five years, or rather four years and a few months, if a man behaved well and got his 'ticket,' was a long time, but a churchyard, especially a closed one, was a place less likely to be interfered with than most, and it was almost certain that the pickle jar with the thirteen hundred pounds' worth of stuff in it would remain snug and undiscovered for twenty years, if it came to that. I took safe precautions against forgetting the 'clue' I had got from the chimbley-pot. The bit of paper I had pencilled on while on the roof was taken away from me, but while I was at Pentonville I was put to work in the tailors' shop, and with a needle and some blue ink I pricked on my arm the exact plan, with the lines and figures, and, as it happened to be very good

ink, it showed as plain as though it had been done with gunpowder, which I believe is the usual way. I got into trouble for doing it, and the doctor wanted to know what it meant. I told him that it represented, in a kind of shorthand, a vow I had taken to get out of my present trouble as soon as possible, and lead a virtuous life ever afterwards, and that the reason why I had tattooed it on my arm was that I might frequently see it and be reminded of my vow and be strengthened to keep it.

“I got five days’ ‘solitary’ for it, but I didn’t mind that. It wasn’t all lies I told the doctor, either. Frequently seeing my little ‘plan’ did strengthen me wonderfully, and kept up my spirits as well. Four years and a bit would soon pass, and then, with the Euston-road robbery long since forgotten, I would turn the precious pickle jar to good account with not much danger. There was only one anxiety that troubled me, and that was that, in the ordinary course of things, Jack Rann might be released before me. He had just eleven weeks start of me, and if his behaviour was good, there was nothing to prevent his getting his ticket eleven weeks before I got mine. The only thing in my favour was that Rann had always shown himself an ugly customer while in prison. All his experience had not taught him better, and he had told me lots of stories of the rows he had had with warders at the different places where he had been sent to. He told me also that he had to serve the last term of three years full to the very day for scalding a warder who had offended him by throwing his pannikin of hot soup in his face. Out of prison,

except when drunk, he was always a morose and savage fellow, and it didn't seem likely that his temper would now improve. I most earnestly hoped that it might not, as everything depended on it. As for me, I made up my mind that, however much I might have to put up with—and nobody but those who have had to put up with it can have any idea how brutal warders can be, and how much prisoners are sometimes baited and goaded—nothing should tempt me to jeopardize my 'ticket' or lessen my right to its fullest privileges.

"And I stuck to my resolution. I had not seen Jack Rann. I knew that he was at Portland Prison, but it is a great place, with hundreds working out of doors as well as in, and he, being a big, strong chap, it was most likely that he was in the stone quarries, and I was in the tailors' shop, so it wasn't likely that we should meet. I kept on well till altogether I had served close on four years, and still I hadn't seen Jack. I wanted to meet with him somehow, if it was only to hear how he had been getting on, and if he had as yet done anything to forfeit his ticket or any portion of it. At last I did meet with him. One of the infirmary attendants was ill, and I was put on in his place, and there I found Jack laid up with a bad leg.

"He was surprised to see me, and we had a talk together, of course, and I think I never felt more disappointed and savage than when he told me that at present there wasn't a black mark against him.

"'I don't mean there should be, Teddy,' says he. 'I'm looking forward and almost counting the days now that stand between this and when I shall be free

to tap that little gold mine you'll remember me making mention of.'

" 'Yes, I remember,' says I ; 'but suppose somebody has been there before you?'

"He laughed at that. 'No fear,' says he, 'I didn't trust even my own wife with that secret. I told you more about it than anybody, and you know how little that was.'

" 'I should have thought you had forgot all about that,' I made answer ; 'you was drunk at the time.'

" 'Not so drunk, Teddy,' says he, grinning, 'as to make a fool of myself. I drew you a plan on the chimbley-pot, but I wasn't such a flat as to name the churchyard, though you did your best to pump it out of me. I wasn't so drunk, but I remember that. I shall be out before you, Teddy, if I have luck, and by the time you are loose I shall have melted the swag, and have a pound or two to spare you, my lad.'

"It was very good of him, but it wasn't good enough for me.

"I had made up my mind that I would be first out, and I wasn't going to throw up the sponge even now. By hook or by crook I meant that he should do something to spoil his 'ticket.' I said no more at the time, not till a fortnight after, when he was well enough to get up and was going back to work again next day. We were both by the fire-place, which I was sweeping up, when I brought the conversation round to the night when we went for shelter into the unfinished houses.

" 'Fancy,' said I, 'you having such a good memory

as to remember scratching what you did with a nail on the chimbley-pot. What was it you did scratch, Jack?’

“‘It’s likely I should tell you, isn’t it?’ he says, laughing.

“‘Was it anything like this?’ I asked him, and at the same time I turned back my sleeve and showed him the tattoo on my arm.

“He saw it, and glared at me speechless for a while, and then, swearing frightful, he snatched the hearth-broom out of my hand and struck me with the head of it, and went on striking me, though I was down and insensible, till they seized him and put the cuffs on him. It was hours before I got my reason back again, and then I was in bed being attended by the doctor. He had done a lot of damage to my head, but I didn’t mind that. I had carried out my intention. I knew that he would strike me when he set eyes on that faithful copy of his little plan, and I meant him to do it, though p’raps not quite so hard, so as to spoil his getting out first. There was no chance for him now. I was laid up for three weeks, but I got my ticket the day it was due, and I came to London, and lost not an unnecessary hour in going to St. Pancras churchyard. But I needn’t have been in such a precious hurry.

“Seventy-five paces straight forward, and then sharp to the right, and thirty-five, I carefully measured the distance, and then I came to a hole, and it was an empty one!

“The precious pickle jar was gone!

“How or where I never knew from that day to

this. But I very well knew what Jack Rann, when he came out, would think about it, so I thought it best to hide myself where he would be least likely to look for me—and that among honest people. That,” said the candid Mr. Whelpdale, “was the beginning of my turning over a new leaf, but you musn’t think that it is all because of my being afraid of Jack Rann that I have stuck to it, for Jack hadn’t been out six months before he was put away again, and that time for fifteen years.”

GOLDBUG'S BARGAIN.

I DON'T remember to have mentioned it, but it is nevertheless a fact, that one of the company accustomed to participate in the innocent relaxations indulged in on Saturday nights in the comfortable parlour of the Nine Nutmegs was old Mr. Crabtree, in whose name the license of the house had stood for more than forty years. He was too far advanced in life now for active business, and his son Hiram officiated in his place.

There was as much difference between father and son as between chalk and cheese, as the saying is.

Hiram was a smart young fellow, of slim build, and had been to America, and he was as disdainful as he dare show himself to be of his father's plodding old-fashioned ways. There would have been no parlour company if young Crabtree could have had his way. He was all for "modernizing," for plate-glass, and gay gas - reflectors, and electro-plated beer-engine "pulls." Where was the use of parlours and tap-rooms, that only harboured slow beer drinkers and old fogies who played whist and who would be an hour over sixpenn'orth of grog?

"Clear the decks" was Hiram's motto. A big bar and plenty of space before it, bare of chair, form, or table, with no encouragement for customers to do anything else than drink up what they ordered, and either call for more or move off and make way for those who were elbowing to get to the counter. That was the way to run the puncheons dry and fatten the tills! But old John Crabtree shook his head. "When you have laid me beside your mother, who lived and died happily in the old-fashioned way," he would say to his son, "then you may turn the Nutmegs inside out, if you please, but there shall be no alteration in my time." So Hiram had to wait, and meanwhile old John smoked his pipe of evenings in the parlour, and was much respected by those he met there.

Except by way of monosyllabic response to any observation addressed to him, it was seldom that Mr. Crabtree opened his lips but in the service of his pipe the whole evening through, but on the occasion of Dr. Scrumpitt relating the second part of his story of "Uncle Lowtch," it was noticed that he was less composed in his demeanour than usual. It was observable, too, that more than once he let his pipe go out, and appeared unaware of it, as, with pursed lips, he gazed inquiringly towards the ceiling as though endeavouring to recall something that was not so lively in his memory as it used to be. Those who took note of these uncommon symptoms were disposed to attribute them to any but the real cause. He may have been trying to remember the items and total of a customer's score by accident

wiped off the slate, or, maybe, he had been having words again with Hiram on the old subject, and was calculating how many more years and months the lease of the Nutmegs had to run. Had everybody present been called on in turn to give a guess as to what was exercising his mind, the puzzle would have probably still remained unsolved.

The amazing fact was that old John was more than half inclined to tell them a story.

Dr. Scrumpitt himself was the first to remark on his abstracted manner.

"Are you reflecting, sir," said he, "on any part of my story that would be clearer to you if it were further explained? If so——"

"Not at all, Doctor," the old landlord interrupted him. "I wish, if it were in my power to tell a tale, I could reel it off as easily as you do. No; to tell you the truth, what I was thinking of was one little remark you made as to a certain person it is not necessary to mention by name not being so black as he is painted. It brings to my recollection, if not a case in point, one that approaches it pretty nearly, it being that of a party who, though not exactly the Old One, represented himself as such, and in that character was the means of converting as awkward a chap as ever I was acquainted with, inducing him to mend his ways and behave as he should to his fellow-creatures. It is so many years ago that it isn't likely anybody here will remember him. I'm speaking of old Sam Goldbug, the rag merchant. I don't recollect him as a young man, but I have always understood that, being left an orphan when

quite a little lad, he had no other way of getting his bread but by picking up rags in the street, and from that he got on, and got on, until he had a share in three or four ships, with rag-buying agents in Russia and other foreign parts, and a large ware'us' in Tooley-street, where hundreds of tons of rags were stored, employing more than fifty women and girls to sort them.

"I did not make Sam's acquaintance until I came here and took the Nutmegs, and found him one of the regular customers. That he was useful at a public-house, I don't deny; but he was not ornamental by a precious long way. He was one of the dirtiest chaps you ever clapped eyes on—one of the surliest and greediest. His drink was rum, and it will, p'r'aps, surprise you to hear that I never saw him drunk when I tell you that I have many a time known him stand and drink nine half-quarters between breakfast and dinner-time. Then he would have three penn'orth of bread and cheese, or a couple o' penn'orth of bacon from the cookshop, and go to the ware'us' and have a sleep on the rags, and come back here in the evening and drink rum again till nine o'clock, when, punctual to the tick of the clock, he'd go home and sit up half the night attending to his accounts and his books, with his wife and a niece of theirs to help him. He was a niggardly old screw towards them. The house they lived in was miserably furnished, and though at the time he must have been worth a matter of five-and-twenty thousand pounds, he would provide but one small joint of meat for the week, and that was bought on Saturday night and cooked on

Sunday. He used to take home in his pocket a few penn'orths of tea and sugar as it was wanted, and a quarter of a pound of butter, and before he came away in the morning, though it might be in the depth of winter, he would put them on an allowance of coals—and a very short allowance it was—and take the key of the coal-cellar with him. I have heard, though I can't answer for the truth of it, that sometimes his wife and the niece were so nearly half starved, owing to his miserly habits, that the old woman would make some excuse to go to the ware'us' and bring away rags under her cloak to sell at the marine-store shop for a few ha'pence. And all the time, as I have already told you, he was so rich that he might have retired and lived handsomely on the interest of his money, without touching the principal.

“But, with him, the principal was got so easy, it was no wonder that he preferred to go on accumulating it. ‘Old Lucky,’ or ‘Lucky Sam,’ were the names he was commonly known by. There was nothing he embarked in, whether for shillings or pounds, but three times out of four it was successful, and only that his greediness and his love for holding what he had made prevented his launching out sufficiently, he might have been worth ten times more than he was. He would buy shares for a mere song in concerns that had already brought other men to beggary and ruin, and in less than six months you wouldn't be able to buy them back again for twenty times what they had cost him. He would purchase foreign rags by the ship's cargo at such a high figure

that people would begin to whisper that old Sam must have gone queer in his head at last ; but, sure as fate, in the nick of time the market would take a turn, and he would make five hundred or a thousand pounds by the transaction. Small things as well as large, it was all the same. The mother of a pot-boy of mine had three hundred pounds left her, and she wanted to buy an annuity with it. Being a healthy woman under fifty, with a mother alive in her eightieth year, all the Government people would offer was twenty pounds a year. 'I'll give her thirty,' said old Sam, 'and make it as safe for her as the Bank of England itself,' and, of course, the woman took it ; and it being then Easter-time, my pot-boy's mother was took with a fit, and died just before the following Christmas.

"Almost miraculous things would happen to bring him a profit. Once a foreign sailor chap was at my bar drinking, and having spent all his money he wanted somebody to buy a heavy chain he wore round his neck with some kind of outlandish 'charm' attached to it. Half-a-dozen people looked at the chain—one of them being the working jeweller from over the way—and they all said that it was copper, and so, if a man might believe his own eye-sight, it was, if ever a coal-scuttle was made of that metal. 'Blacky' didn't say it wasn't, and all he asked for it was three shillings, which, of course, was laughed at, its seeming value being about ninepence. And then in comes old Sam, and he has a look at it. 'Half-a-crown is my price for it,' says he, and 'Blacky' takes it, and old Sam, who couldn't have known more

about what the chain was made of than we did, he takes it to a refiner and sells it for fifteen pounds ten, it being solid gold of the first quality.

"But I couldn't if I tried remember a twentieth of the curious instances of most surprising slices of luck that fell to old Sam Goldbug's share; but the more he made the more miserable he became. As I have already given you to understand, though generally lucky he was not invariably so. Now and again he would sustain a loss in his speculations, and on such occasions, had he been met in the street by any one who knew him, but not the cause of his despondency, it might have been well supposed that the old rag merchant was utterly ruined, and was then on his way to the workhouse to beg for shelter there.

"And a nice time of it those at home had when he experienced these exceptions to his good fortune; and this will be better understood when I tell you that he attributed his turns of bad luck solely and entirely to the adverse influences brought to bear against them by his wife. She was the one thorn in his side, and it was no wonder that the avaricious old money-grubber disliked her as he did.

"A simple-minded and piously-inclined poor soul, ill-used and abused by her savage old husband, the one consolation of her existence was to attend regularly at the little meeting-house, where religious service was held, there to offer up her prayers that the rag merchant might be brought to see the error of his ways and receive timely enlightenment as to the danger of the course he was at present pursuing, in giving no thought to anything but money-making,

to say nothing as to his being, perhaps, not quite so scrupulous as he might be in his manner of making it.

"There had been a time—it was when they were first married and for a few years afterwards—when Sam Goldbug, though from his earliest manhood he must have confessed to a relish for rum, used to go with his wife pretty frequently to meeting. But when he began to prosper apace his attendances grew fewer, and as it was from that period that Mrs. Goldbug dated the commencement of her conjugal unhappiness, it was only natural that she should yearn for her husband's conversion from the infatuation that had so altered him. In fact, she privately and persistently prayed against his good luck, and that to a man of old Sam's disposition and pursuits must have been very aggravating.

"Which only shows the inconsistent chap he was. To his wife's head he would mock and deride her for what he called her make-believe religious whims, and he would brag of his utter unbelief in the meeting-house and the whole hypocritical canting crew that belonged to it, shepherd and flock alike; but, for all that, whenever he meditated a bit of business of a more than ordinary shady kind, he was afraid to so much as mention it to Mrs. Goldbug, lest she should 'pray him out of his chance' of making a profit on it. They had more rows, fights even, if they could be called such, when the punching was all on one side and the screaming all on the other, on that one subject than anything else. She was never safe from him. When things went wrong and he expected to make a good haul and was disappointed, home he

would go straight, and accuse his wife of being the cause, and call her the vilest names, and if their niece, Judith, didn't happen to be in the way at the time, thump her with his fists till the neighbours would hear her crying for mercy.

"If matters went swimmingly with him, it was just as bad for her, poor soul. Then he would be constantly haunted with the suspicion that, to use his own irreverent phrase, she was 'getting the steam up for him' in secret, and would succeed if he did not put a damper on her undutiful efforts. He would surprise her when she least expected him, and more than once, when, as she supposed, he had gone off for the day, banging the street door behind him, he had instead slipped off his boots and crept up the stairs quietly so that he might cover with his ear the key-hole of the room she was in and listen if she was praying against him. For years she had not slept in the same room with him, his persecutions were so unbearable. Knowing that, if left alone, she would say her prayers before she went to sleep, and aware of the strong probability that he would be remembered in them, the conscienceless old heathen would prevent her settling her mind to serious thoughts by singing—and he had no more voice for vocalism than a bear—all manner of ribald songs as he lay by her side, compelling her to join in the refrain by pinching her and digging her with his elbow, his object being to so completely tire her out that, in time, she would be glad to drop off to sleep with her prayers unsaid.

"She was not safe from him even then.

"He was so afraid that she might wake up in the

night and devote herself to the religious duty she had neglected that the least sound roused him from his uneasy slumber, and it sometimes happened that he was mistaken as to the said sound, and that instead of murmuring her good supplications, poor Mrs. Goldbug would be gently snoring merely. But, too infuriated to discriminate between the two noises, she would probably find dealt at her a clout on the head fit to knock her nightcap off.

“He gave her no peace out or at home. Indeed, their most alarming disagreement was not within doors, but at the very meeting-house I have already mentioned. Old Sam had a scheme in hand by which, with luck, he hoped to clear six or seven hundred pounds. It was a rather delicate affair. He had advanced money at a swinging rate of interest to a well-nigh bankrupt master lighterman, not with any great hope that the man himself would be able to settle up, but on the strength of his having ascertained, through a private source, that a rich relative of the lighterman intended in a short time to come forward and pay all his debts and set him floating again. He would, of course, have kept this transaction from his wife’s knowledge, as, as far as he could, he did all others, but for some reason or other he was obliged to tell her something of it, at the same time swearing—and he could swear—that if she as much as ‘raised her eyes’ against him she would have reason to be sorry for it until her dying day.

“But it seemed to the honest woman such a dreadful thing to squeeze money out of an unfortunate man under such circumstances that she not only

resolved to disobey him, but—entirely in his spiritual behalf and interest—to solicit the prayerful intercession of the congregation at the meeting-house, so that her husband might yet be induced to hold his rapacious hand.

“Now it so happened that the lighterman’s business turned out to be one of the most dismal failures that had ever befallen the rag merchant. The day had arrived when the rich relation had promised to come forward, and he had kept his word, and went to the lighterman’s office for the purpose. But the door was locked, and when it was burst open the unfortunate man, driven to his wit’s end by his troubles, and not dreaming that relief was at hand, had hanged himself to a beam and was dead. So instead of getting the money he had lent, with 50 per cent. as well, Sam Goldbug’s prospect was to get nothing at all.

“Of course, it naturally occurred to his evil mind that such a tremendous stroke of bad luck must, in part, at all events, be due to his wife praying against him, and bent on paying her out for it, he hurried home. She was not there, however. She had gone with her niece Judith to meeting, and thither old Sam went, and service having just commenced, he listened at a chink in the closed door, and was in time to hear the gentleman who was about to hold forth ‘bespeak the pious entreaties of the members of his congregation on behalf of an individual whom he would not name, but who was in deadly peril through excessive fondness for money.’ He begged them to pray that an undertaking he was then about to embark in might miscarry, and that he might thus be brought to bow

to the rod of chastening and amend his sinful ways. Sam had a full view of his wife and niece from the chink where he was peeping, and he was goaded to beyond boiling point when he saw them both shaking their heads and heard them crying 'Amen' louder than anybody else.

"He ought to have known better, even though, as is admitted, the exasperation was very great. He might, at all events, if he wished to say anything to the good deacon, have waited for him outside till the service was at an end. Instead of which he burst into the building, raging like a mad bull, and before the astonished deacon could retreat from the platform, capsized him as well as his table and water bottle; and then, from amidst the wreckage, he addressed the congregation in such vituperative terms that they could no longer have been in doubt as to who the unknown sinner was they had been invited to supplicate for. If they were possessed of any lingering uncertainty on the subject it must have been dissipated when, advancing to Mrs. Goldbug, he knocked her bonnet off, and then commanded her to come home with him instantly, that he might settle with her an account of which that was but a trifling instalment. It was a very fortunate thing for the poor woman that her niece Judith was with her at the time. Only once since she was seventeen had he ventured to tackle Judith, who was a well-built young woman of manly spirit and no small amount of masculine strength. In her aunt's protection she had placed herself before her, when her Uncle Sam took her by the shoulders to shake her, but before he could make good his grip

he found himself clutching at the fender, and he had kept his hands off her ever since.

“He had to wait until Judith was out of the way before he ventured to administer to his wife the correction she deserved for spoiling some of his best bargains by praying against them. Indignant neighbours on such occasions would tell him to his head that his wife was too good for him. ‘You never spoke truer words in your life,’ old Sam would reply, with a savage grin. ‘She would suit me a blarmed sight better if she wasn’t half as good.’ It was before I made his acquaintance, but I have been told that having tried every other way he knew to checkmate the influence she exercised on his ‘luck,’ he systematically set about endeavouring to undermine her morals. Though it must have cost him many a wrench on account of the expense, he insisted on her accompanying him to the theatres and music halls, and Vauxhall Gardens being in full swing at the time on more than one occasion he took her there and gave her an oyster supper afterwards. From denying her even so much as half-a-pint of beer for her supper, he took to keeping gin and brandy in the house, and very often he would stay at home all the evening, so that he might induce her to take more than was good for her. But he soon grew tired of these desperate devices. They only made her more low-spirited and dejected next day, and he was well aware that in that frame of mind she was more dangerous against him as far as his business speculations were concerned than in any other. So he abandoned his wicked design and did all he could to make up for the wasted outlay by cutting down

the housekeeping expenses to a lower scale than before.

“But notwithstanding all that he had to contend against he went on making money and grew richer every year. But he grumbled none the less, and was just as shabby and niggardly in his dealings with everybody. I have told you about his employing fifty women and girls at his rag-sorting ware’us’ in Tooley-street. Well, from paying them eighteen-pence a day, he lessened their wages, a penny at a time, till he got them to work for a shilling a day, from morning till night, and with no time at all for their meals. They hated him before, but a great deal more when it came to that; and they used to rob him, carrying away rags by wrapping them round them beneath their skirts. Old Sam was furious against them when he found that out, and, laying a trap for them, caught seven of them in one batch, and prosecuted them and got them three months’ imprisonment, with hard labour, very much to his delight and satisfaction. His good humour was but short-lived, however, and poor Mrs. Goldbug came in for it again. There was one young woman who worked at the warehouse and who likewise was a constant attendant at the place of worship where old Sam’s wife went. So you may depend he was not long in acquainting her with the fact of the girl having been given into custody as a thief.

“‘I don’t believe it,’ said Mrs. Goldbug indignantly. ‘It must be a mistake. Mark my words, Samuel, if that poor creature’s innocence does not sooner or later come to light.’

“‘I have no doubt it would be so if you could bring it about,’ her husband made answer sneeringly. ‘You, who are so clever at praying, why don’t you set about praying away the evidence that will convict her as surely as you have got a nose on your face, and a deuced ugly one it is? Why don’t you pray that the magistrate may disbelieve the evidence of the female searcher at the station-house who found my property on the dear innocent young creature pinned about her under her frock?’

“‘I will pray for her,’ returned the poor woman. ‘I’ll pray for her heart and soul.’

“Sam laughed and snapped his fingers.

“‘You are welcome to do it for once,’ said he; ‘much good may it do her or you.’

“But there was something in store for him he didn’t expect. The young rag-sorter was convicted with the others, but, thanks to the meeting-house congregation acting on what was brought to their knowledge, they raised a subscription amongst them and employed a shrewd lawyer. Then it was clearly shown that the property that Sam Goldbug had claimed as his was the girl’s own—her tattered old petticoat that was pinned about her because it was so completely worn out it would not bear strings being sewn on to it. There could be no mistake about it, because the girl’s mother produced in court a frock body that, with the ragged skirt, had once formed one garment. There was an action for false imprisonment, and the jury gave the injured young woman five-and-twenty pounds damages, which, of course, old Sam had to pay, together with the costs. Mad for revenge

against his wife, whom he had no doubt was entirely responsible for the misfortune, he went straight home after the trial. She had a print portrait of her favourite preacher in a humble frame hanging in her bedroom, and the vindictive old sinner took it down and put it in a frying-pan, with plenty of fat, and fried it in her presence, face downwards, using as fuel the good books she took to meeting with her.

“‘Remember my words, husband!’ said Mrs. Goldbug, after vainly endeavouring to rescue the picture, while he, savagely grinning, kept her at bay with a fork, ‘remember my words, a judgment will fall on you for this.’

“He laughed in her face, and mockingly remarked that he hoped the judgment would not take the shape of his being soon left a widower—he could bear any calamity but that! But, singularly enough, it happened that from that time a change gradually came over him. He grew downcast and melancholy, like a man with something heavy on his mind, and more miserly than ever. At last he began to lessen his own allowance of rum. In place of half-quarterns he took to having three ha’p’orths, and instead of eight or nine lots before dinner-time he would have sometimes not more than three or four. And from that time, gentlemen,” remarked old Mr. Crabtree, with a glance round at his attentive audience, as though to impress them with the righteousness of the judgment, “old Sam Goldbug went wrong. We were cronies, and he used to tell me in confidence things he would not tell anybody else. He wanted to know—quite between ourselves, and as a matter that was by no means to

be mentioned to any one else—if I thought there was anything remarkable in his luck—anything in it that made it appear different from the luck that other people had. I did not know what he was driving at, so I told him honestly my opinion that I looked on his luck as being very remarkable indeed. ‘Why you must be aware of it yourself, Sam,’ said I. ‘There is nobody who has a better reason for being aware of it, I should think. Ask anybody who knows you?’

“‘Aye, aye,’ said he, ‘I know what they would tell me to my face; but I want to know what they say behind my back?’

“‘I’ll tell you what some of them say,’ I made answer, in a laughing kind of way. ‘They say that you have the devil’s luck and your own as well.’ I never saw a man so agitated or one whose face more suddenly altered than his did when I uttered those words.

“‘John Crabtree!’ says he, ‘you are a truthful man, and I believe what you say; but don’t laugh and make light of it. It is a burden on my mind—a growing burden—and it prevents my getting my natural sleep of nights. I lay awake in the dark, and my thoughts are disturbed in the strangest way.’

“‘Why, what about?’ I asked him.

“‘About this luck of mine,’ he remarked, sinking his voice almost to a whisper. ‘I’m growing afraid of it, John! So they say behind my back that I have the devil’s luck and my own, do they? Look here, John, I must tell somebody, and there’s nobody I can

trust with a secret but you. I begin to be of the same opinion myself. Why, if it wasn't for that confounded old woman of mine who drags a bit in the balance t'other side, I do believe I should have everything my own way, without anything being left to chance at all. And the question that's haunting me is, "Is that luck of a natural sort, or a loan for which a man may have to pay a penalty for hereafter?"

"How long since is it that you allowed this nonsense to creep into your head?" I asked him.

"I don't allow it," he replied. "I've got no power over it. The nonsense, as you call it, wormed its way in, first of all, just after I fied the minister."

"And then he told me about the picture and his burning the hymn books to do it with. I did my best to chaff him out of it, and gave him, as my opinion, that his not being able to sleep at night was all owing to his having broken away from his usual habits of drinking. 'You go to bed without your nightcap, Sam,' says I. 'That's how it is. You still have a nightcap of a sort, but it don't fit you. It's made of three ha'p'orths of rum instead of half-quarterns; consequently, it's too small, and you are restless in it.' But I could tell from his manner of shaking his head that my explanation was not a satisfactory one, and a few nights afterwards he had a dream.

"He dreamt that his wonderful luck was all owing to his having sold himself to Satan. It couldn't be called a dream exactly, he said, because, to the best of his knowledge, he had not closed his eyes, when a figure he was not able to describe appeared at his

bed-side, bringing him a message. The message made reference to a certain contract Sam had entered into a good many years ago with the powers of darkness, the principal terms of which were that on condition that he signed away the most precious thing he possessed—his soul, in fact—he would for a time have luck unlimited. ‘I am sent,’ said the misty messenger—it was more like smoke than a creature of substance—‘to tell you that the end of that time is drawing nigh, and to ask you to be prepared for the consequences.’

“And then the spectre vanished, leaving old Sam so unnerved, although he was quite unconscious of ever having made any such diabolical compact, that he got out of bed and went to his wife’s room, and, waking her up, told her all about it.

“It will afford you a tolerably good idea of the state of alarm old Sam was in, that he should seek his wife in her separate bed-room to relate to her the awful dream he had had. As a rule, he would no more have thought of confiding to her anything of importance than of trusting her with the key of his cash-box. Indeed, she knew no more of his private affairs than was to be found out by means of she and her niece keeping the account-books, and that, with any woman less meek and forgiving than Mrs. Goldbug was, would have been enough to make her hate him. What else could have been expected? He, who any day could have drawn a cheque for twenty thousand pounds, and who at the same time allowed her to take cold in her limbs through refusing to part with the paltry sum of two-and-ninepence to

have her old shoes soled and heeled ! I can't tell what she replied to him when, shivering and shaking, he woke her up and told her of the awful apparition that had appeared to him. Possibly she advised the best thing he could do was to say his prayers, in which case I have no doubt that the wicked old sinner growled out to her something uncivil, and went back to his own bed-room again.

" Anyhow, though he may have been a little more shaky when he called at the Nutmegs next morning and told me about his queer dream, it did not seem to have unnerved him as much as you would have thought it might. Of course the conversation turned again on his unaccountable luck.

" ' There is only one thing would set me right,' said he. ' That is to have a run of bad luck. Not a long run, or a heavy one. I couldn't afford that ; but just a temporary turn of the tide, of the ordinary kind, and such as might happen to any man.'

" ' You might easily bring that about if you were foolish enough,' said I ; ' it is all rubbish as to your luck being a thing to be frightened about. I wish that I had half of the affliction you are complaining of. Just you set aside your wisdom and judgment for a little time, and you will precious soon find matters go rather more contrary than you would wish 'em.'

" Well, gentlemen, what do you think he did that very day ? He read in the newspapers that a certain copper mine, somewhere down in Cornwall, had become suddenly flooded, and that to an extent that it would possibly be years before it could be cleared

and restored to a condition to be worked again, and that, consequently, the shares were a drug in the market at 75 per cent. less than they just before had been realizing. Just to give his bad luck a chance—I feel sure it could have been for no other reason—he sent and bought a hundred pounds' worth of those shares, and, three days after, to everybody's amazement, the flood in the copper mine disappeared as suddenly and unaccountably as it had broken in, and the shares went up again to their original value.

“I felt quite anxious to see him again when I heard about it, naturally, after what he told me, and expected that he would be more low-spirited and despondent than ever at this last amazing instance of its being out of his power to conquer his wonderful luck, and I was much relieved to find that it seemed to give him a turn all the other way. I never saw him more lively and jovial than when he came and told me how much he had bagged. ‘Here’s luck to the *old* luck,’ says he, treating himself to a full quartern of rum, and drinking it in a defiant sort of way, ‘and if ever you hear me find fault with it again, John Crabtree, call me an old fool.’

“But if he had forgot the scare the mysterious ‘messenger’ had caused him, his wife had not.

“She was a superstitious woman, and she put her own construction on the strange visitation.

“Much as her husband was in the habit of ill-using and abusing her, she bore him no animosity, and she would cheerfully have made any sacrifice to have persuaded him from his miserly and money-worship-

ping ways, and make him again the man he was twenty years ago.

"In a vague and indistinct sort of way she had an idea that the 'visitation' was for old Sam's good, but she was not clever enough to see how; so she resolved to consult her niece Judith on the subject.

"Now Judith had a sweetheart. He was only the second mate of an East Indiaman, but as handsome a young fellow as she was a lass—a rollicking, dare-devil sort of a chap, and brown as a berry with foreign voyaging in hot climates. Though, with the aunt's knowledge, they had kept company for more than a year, and were engaged to be married as soon as Charley Grover—that was his name—got his promotion and was made chief mate, old Sam had never clapped eyes on him. Charley happened to be ashore for a spell when Mr. Goldbug had his bad dream, and when the wife told Judith about it the next morning her advice was that Charley Grover should be consulted.

"That lively and ingenuous young fellow entered into the affair with spirit, and, given an hour or two to reflect on ways and means, at the end of that time he unfolded for the consideration of the aunt and niece such a plot that, for the moment, it almost took the old lady's breath away. She declared that she would have nothing to do with anything that was so daring, and which was so much like holding a candle to the powers of darkness. But Charley Grover argued the matter with them, and in the end succeeded in convincing the aunt as well as the niece that no harm could possibly come of what he

proposed. It was quite evident, he said, that the warning the old gentleman had received had done him not the least good, and that he was bent on going from bad to worse unless severe measures were taken to check him. This scheme, he declared, though it might at first sight present features that were not very pleasant, might be worked out with great success if judiciously managed, and that at most old Mr. Goldbug would receive a shock to his system from which his tough constitution would no doubt enable him in a short time to recover, while it might turn out to be the very best thing that could happen to him. So eventually they agreed to his proposal.

"But before it could be put into operation, Charley Grover declared that it would be necessary for him to be made acquainted with some particulars of Mr. Goldbug's earlier history, before he began to thrive and grow rich, and then Mrs. Goldbug proceeded to give him a faithful account of what a good young man her Samuel was when she first knew him, and how for at least three years afterwards he would wash himself of evenings and go to meeting with her.

"‘I suppose,’ remarked Judith’s sweetheart, ‘that in those pleasant days he did not drink—didn’t spend much money in rum?’

"‘But there you are mistaken,’ returned old Mrs. Goldbug. ‘It was always his weakness. Even when he hadn’t begun to get on much in the world he was commonly addicted to it. It was always a wonder to me that he progressed in business. He used to tell us that he could never think out his plans properly until he had had a few glasses. In the house where

we used then to live, and which was over in Snow's Fields, in Bermondsey, there was a dark little underground kitchen that was never lived in, and whenever he had anything of a particular nature to work out, he would have a fire made down there and take a bottle of rum and lock himself in and do it.'

" 'But why did he lock himself in?' Charley Grover asked, with a suddenly increased interest in what the old lady was telling him.

" 'Because he wouldn't be disturbed. He would fly in a temper even with me, and at that time when we were such good friends, if I went down and ventured to speak to him even through the key-hole. He liked to be absolutely alone. After working out his ideas, if there was any rum remaining in the bottle he would stay down there until he had drank it all, and then he would go to sleep for perhaps three or four hours, and come up as sober as a judge and all ready to carry out the scheme he had worked out.'

" 'And was it from that time that he began to make headway in his trade?'

" 'From the very commencement of that time,' replied Mrs. Goldbug. 'I've heard him say often enough, "If I was to pave that old kitchen with crown pieces it would be no more than it has brought me at the times when I've put on my considering cap, on the quiet, down there."' "

" Charley Grover rubbed his hands with delight.

" 'Why, then,' said he, 'there we have the key to the whole thing, and I am very glad I asked you a question that led to your mere mention of the dark old kitchen and what took place there. Just give me,'

says he, 'the exact address of the house in Snow's Fields, and I will put it down in my pocket-book for fear I forget it.'

"'But it is no use you going there,' said Mrs. Goldbug, 'the place has been pulled down years ago.'

"'That makes no difference,' replied Charley Grover. 'And what about the furniture in the old kitchen? It was furnished, I suppose?'

"'There was nothing in it but lumber,' said she. 'There was an old bench that belonged to the brush-maker who had the place before we took it. That served Sam for a table, and he made himself a snug easy-chair out of one of the hogsheads the foreign rags came over in. He sawed out part of the front half way down and fixed a seat in it, and with some of the rags for a cushion nothing could be snugger.'

"'But suppose, by chance,' Grover asked, having first jotted down these particulars about the 'easy-chair,' 'suppose you or any one else had gone into the kitchen to talk with him, was there nothing you could sit on?'

"'The few times I went in,' replied Mrs. Goldbug, after some reflection, 'I sat by the fire on the coal-box, with the bellows laid a-top of it to made the seat higher.'

"'Was there anything peculiar about the coal-box or the bellows?' Judith's sweetheart asked, when he had made this second memorandum.

"'Nothing that I remember, 'cept that the bellows had no nozzle to it. But that hain't worth mentioning. There's plenty of bellowses I've seen that were like that.'

“‘But we are dealing with this bellows in particular, ma’am,’ remarked Charley, laughingly, ‘and not with bellowses in general. With the valuable information you have given me the task before me will come as easy almost as fitting on an old glove.’

“Well,” continued Mr. Crabtree, “it so happened about this time that old Sam Goldbug, who had, seemingly, got over his qualms of conscience as regards his strange luck, judging from the way he went in for making money by hook or by crook, was attacked with rheumatism in his back and shoulders and confined to his bed. He was so bad that he could scarcely raise his head from the pillow, let alone get up, so I leave you to guess the sort of temper he was in from morning till night, and the nice time his wife and niece had of it. One evening it was necessary that both women should be away from home on his business, and he was left alone, and with no one in the house but himself. It wasn’t likely he would require waiting on before they returned. His rum was placed on a table by his bed-side, and they had made up a good fire. It was growing towards dark, and he was growling and groaning with pain, when there came a tapping at the room door. Thinking nothing else than it was his wife returned, and wondering why she could not come in without knocking, he rattled out a few oaths to that effect, and bade whoever it was come in, and straight-way the handle of the lock was turned, and in somebody came.

“It was neither his wife nor his niece, however.

“It was a man !

“As I have already mentioned, it was more dark than

twilight, but the fire in the grate was burning brightly, and old Sam could make out the figure with tolerable distinctness. The stranger was tall and of swarthy complexion, though good-looking and with a rather fascinating manner than otherwise, and with black curly hair and a long drooping moustache of the same colour. He wore a dark cloak and a slouch hat, which he politely raised as he entered the room, remarking—

“‘Mr. Goldbug, if I am not mistaken?’

“Mr. Goldbug, regarding him with amazement, replied—

“‘No; you are not mistaken, so far. Goldbug is my name, but who the devil are you? and what do you want here?’

“‘I thought you expected me,’ the stranger replied, coolly drawing a chair to Sam’s bedside, and seating himself on it. ‘But it is all the same. Our little business will not take long to settle.’

“The stranger, though somewhat mysterious in his manner and outlandish in his appearance, looked so little diabolical that old Sam had no suspicion as yet.

“‘But it does matter, sir!’ he exclaimed, putting himself to excruciating pain in an endeavour to sit up in bed. ‘Who opened the street door for you? How did you get in? You have made a mistake and come to the wrong house.’

“‘I don’t see how that can be,’ returned his visitor, affably, ‘when I have found the person I wanted in it. Don’t be unreasonable, Mr. Goldbug. I don’t think you have had much to complain of as far as I am concerned.’

“‘But who the deuce’—he was about to use the

more vulgar appellation, but a sudden alarming suspicion checked him, and he substituted the milder term—‘who the deuce are you, and what do you mean when you say that you thought I should be expecting you?’

“‘Well, I thought it not unlikely, since I sent you word. It is not so long ago. But I suppose you are so deeply engaged in business that a trifling affair such as mine has slipped your memory?’

“‘I don’t know in the least what you are talking about,’ returned old Sam stoutly. ‘You sent word as to your calling on me? When was that? Did you send by post? If so, I never received your letter.’

“‘No, I did not send by post,’ the stranger replied quietly, and at the same time producing from a pocket in the inside of his black cloak a roll of what looked like parchment tied with red tape. ‘I forwarded my communication by one of my special messengers. Last Tuesday three weeks it was, if I rightly remember. He had a long way to come and several other calls to make, so I dare say it was late before he arrived here. Two o’clock in the morning probably.’

“Old Sam could no longer have any doubt as to who his visitor was.

“It was not rheumatism alone that now held him powerless to move in his bed.

“It was terror as well.

“Last Tuesday three weeks was the exact time when he got that awful frightening, and now that the hour was mentioned he distinctly recollected that it was twenty minutes past two when the mysterious

'messenger,' having executed his commission, vanished, and he sprang out of bed to go and tell his wife.

"At the same time, however, there came into his mind the comforting reflection that, after all, there was nothing for him to be in a great funk about. For all that the messenger had said, and for all that his master had come to verify, there was no shadow of pretence for saying that he really had sold himself to the father of wickedness. 'He looks wonderfully young for such a father' (old Sam thought, as he glanced at him), and that, therefore, no harm could happen to him. This happy thought went far towards restoring his self-possession, and he found courage to remark—

"'It is all a mistake, I once more tell you, and I hav'n't the least idea what it is you are alluding to. It must be some other Goldbug you have business with. He don't live here, anyhow.'

"'He didn't live here when our little compact was made,' returned the stranger smiling, and still in perfect good humour, 'but that is a good many years since. How many? Twenty-three, isn't it?'

"Old Sam did not notice the last part of his visitor's remark, but asked cunningly—

"'And where did your Mr. Goldbug live at that time?'

"'He lived,' returned the other, referring to a memorandum he took from his pocket, 'at 74, Peter-street, Snow's Fields, Bermondsey. That is correct, I believe?'

"'Correct or not,' replied old Sam, amazed and

staggered that his visitor should know so much, 'I never saw you there. That I swear!'

" 'I have no objection to your swearing,' returned the imperturbable visitor, 'but it won't alter the fact. Pshaw! man, it is no use your trying to shuffle and quibble with me. I was a past master of both arts before your great-grandfather was born. It is true that I do a large amount of business, but I have a shrewd memory for faces, and you are the person I want beyond a doubt,' and he began to untie the parchment scroll.

"Old Sam's heart sunk within him. 'It is all a mistake, I tell you,' was all that he could ejaculate. 'There are other Goldbugs, in all probability, I could mention, if I could only remember their exact address, several who resided in Snow's Fields at the time when I lived there.'

" 'And were they all in the rag-dealing business?' asked the stranger mockingly, 'and was there a little dark kitchen to the house where all the other Goldbugs lived to which they used to retire to drink rum whenever they had any affair of particular importance to arrange?'

"Old Sam uttered a groan of dismay.

" 'Aha! we are coming to an understanding now, are we?' the visitor continued, with a Satanic chuckle. 'Shall I give you a description of the kitchen on the evening when you called me in to your assistance? Shall I show you the exact position of the furniture?' and he pushed aside old Sam's rum bottle and glass to make room on the table. 'Here is

the fire-place ; here the bench that served as a table ; here the barrel, cut and contrived and turned into a comfortable chair for you to sit in ; here the coal-box, with a pair of bellows—wanting a nozzle, as I well remember—placed on the top of it, and serving me for a seat while we discussed our business. Confound it ! you won't have the impudence after I have been at the pains to give your memory so many refreshers to deny that we have met before ?'

"Poor old Sam Goldbug lay back on his pillow speechless, but opening his eyes wider and yet wider, as the terrible figure in the cloak and slouched hat piled up the items of evidence that proved beyond question that the kitchen of the house in Snow's Fields was familiar to him. It would have been absolutely impossible, after so many years, too, for him to have so accurately described the furniture and how it was placed if he had not been there. 'Could it be possible,' thought old Sam, as he lay staring at his visitor, who had unrolled the parchment and spread it out on the table, 'could it be possible that at some time when my brain was distracted with the complicated affairs of the trade, I might have drank myself temporarily out of my mind, and in that condition invoked and accepted the assistance of Satan ? It might have been, and that I fell into a sleep afterwards, and, waking up, forgot all about it. If so, that accounts for my infernal luck ; that accounts for the "messenger" last Tuesday three weeks. It accounts for everything !' This last he uttered aloud, and with a dismal moan.

“‘Of course it does,’ remarked the visitor; ‘here is your signature in proof of it. But after your bare-faced attempt at repudiation I shouldn’t be surprised if you disputed your own handwriting. Here it is!’ and he held up the parchment.

“‘I can’t see in the dark,’ whimpered poor old Sam. ‘Where is the use of showing a man writing when it is too dark for him to make it out?’

“The stranger stepped to the fire-place, and, taking out with the tongs a blazing coal, held it aloft, sulphurous and smoking, and by that means showed Mr. Goldbug a light, while he held the parchment before his eyes with the other hand.

“‘Now you can see,’ he exclaimed, sharply. ‘Come, let us have no more of this childishness. My time is precious.’

“Yes, there was the signature right enough, seemingly. But he couldn’t make out the writing that composed the body of the document. It was inscribed in characters he never recollected to have seen before, and he said so.

“‘It is written in the same language as I always write in when making out such contracts,’ replied his visitor, sternly. ‘I read it over to you at the time you signed it, though it will not surprise me if you deny *that*. I’ll read it through again if you like. But it makes no difference, since you acknowledge the signature.’

“‘All I can say about it,’ said the bewildered old chap, ‘is, that if I signed that document, as I suppose I must have done, I was drunk at the time.’

“‘You were so far gone in liquor,’ returned the visitor, coolly, ‘that I had to guide your hand that held the pen. Nevertheless, you can’t deny that I have faithfully kept my part of our bond, and your good luck has been unceasing. You will acknowledge that?’

“‘Oh, yes, I am bound to acknowledge that,’ answered old Sam. ‘But you won’t be hard with me? What is your object in calling?’

“‘It is stipulated that I should do so—twelve months before the expiration of the contract. It was your own suggestion. Here it is in black and white. I suppose you thought you would like a timely reminder. It could hardly have been that you meant to play any tricks.’ And the visitor glared at him with a terrible frown.

“Old Sam caught at his words.

“‘Tricks!’ he exclaimed, eagerly; ‘what tricks?’

“‘In the way, I mean, of repenting,’ returned the visitor, with a sneer, ‘making amends to those you have injured—or adopting any other mean and shabby device for sneaking out of your agreement. No, no; you are not the man to do that, I know. With another year of splendid luck before you, you can make twenty times as much money as you have got at present. Come, shake hands, and let us part in a friendly way.’

“But old Sam shrank from the touch that was extended to him.

“‘I deny the contract!’ he exclaimed, desperately. ‘I was not in my proper senses when I, as you say,

signed it, but which I don't admit. I repudiate it. I *will* make amends, and I *will* repent, and I defy you to do your worst !'

"It must have been an appalling thing to have witnessed the visitor's rage when he heard old Sam say this. But his fury was expressed in looks, not in words. 'You think you will repent !' he remarked, mockingly ; 'but, grasping old miser that you are, you will never find the courage to do it. In a year's time I shall find you as fit for me as you are now. Should it be so, expect no mercy !'

"And, tying up the parchment again with the red tape, he thrust it into the cloak pocket, and, with one parting threatening shake of his fist to old Sam, vanished from the room.

"Old Sam Goldbug must have fainted, for when his wife came into the room a few minutes afterwards he was lying unconscious, and it was not until they applied burnt feathers to his nose that he gasped, sneezed, and, opening his eyes, looked fearfully round the room—

" 'Is it—is he gone ?' he ejaculated, catching tight hold of his wife's arm.

" 'Has who gone ?' she asked him.

"But, instead of replying, he burst into tears, and did what he had not done for eighteen years, at least, he threw his arms round her neck and kissed her. 'I've been dreaming again, Sally,' said he, 'and, oh ! such a dream !'

"She was so overcome with remorse that she was in half a mind to confess to him the trick that had been

played. But instead of doing so, she kissed him again, as lovingly as she knew how to after having been so long out of practice, and asked him what he had been dreaming about.

“‘It wouldn’t interest you, my dear, if I was to tell you,’ he made answer, evasively; ‘but I have something to say to you that will, Sally. I am going to give up business!’

“‘I have heard you say so many times before,’ said his wife.

“‘Ay; but I mean it this time,’ he replied, resolutely. ‘I will go to the ware’us’ to-morrow morning and shut up the place and discharge all the hands, and give them as good as a month’s wages to make up for the hasty dismissal.’ His wife looked at him in alarm, thinking, perhaps, that the shock he had received had affected his brain. But he was all right in that respect. What the shock had done was to cure his rheumatism. He didn’t get up that night but he ordered a nice little supper to be got ready for him and his wife and the niece, and they had it in the bed-room, and afterwards a bottle of old port, and old Sam kissed Judith, and asked her to forgive him, and there and then gave her a five-pound note to buy her some new clothes. And next morning he got up and went to the warehouse and did all that he had said he would the night before, and called on his way back here at the Nutmegs for a drop of rum. Of course, I knew nothing of what had taken place, but I saw at once by his changed manner that something strange had occurred.

“‘You don’t look yourself, Sam, this morning,’ I remarked. To which he replied, catching hold of my hand and giving it a squeeze—

“‘I am not myself, John—my old self, I mean—and I am thankful to gracious goodness for it. You will never see the Sam Goldbug you have been used to any more. I’ve just come away from the ware’us,’ he says, showing me the key, ‘and I’ve locked him in there, and, if I can help it, he shall never get out again. If anybody asks after me, John Crabtree—after *him*, I mean, “Lucky Sam,”—tell them what I’ve told you, and that they will never see him again. *You* shall, my boy! The new Sam Goldbug will send you his address as soon as he has done what his mind is fixed on.’

“But I never saw him again,” said old Mr. Crabtree, bringing his strange story to a conclusion. “It was rumoured, but few people believed it at the time, that old Sam was seen next day, clean washed and shaved, and wearing a bran new suit of clothes. But he never again appeared in the old quarter. More than a month after he sent me a letter from Hastings, where he had taken a house and handsomely furnished it. In the letter he invited me to come and stay with him for a week. He was quite happy, he said, with his dear wife and niece, and he likewise informed me that the day before they had paid a visit to the work-house infirmary and made all the old men and women there suitable presents. So,” said old John, “I naturally concluded from that that he had gone off his head, and that it was no good going to see him. It

was not until Sam Goldbug died, which was five or six years afterwards, when I went to the funeral, that I heard the story I have told you from Charley Grover himself. He had long ago married the niece, between whom and his wife the old man had left half his fortune, and the other half to build almshouses for old and destitute rag-sorters."

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